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For immediate release

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B117 COVID variant, a more contagious and severe COVID strain, has been found in the Panhandle

The B117 COVID variant has been confirmed in the Panhandle. Confirmation was received late today of a teen male, teen female, and female in her 30s from the Nebraska Public Health Lab testing and notification from the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. Any close contacts identified will be quarantined to slow the spread.

This variant was initially detected in the UK and in the US this past December. This variant seems to spread more easily and quickly than other variants which may lead to more COVID cases with the potential for increased severity. Viruses constantly change through mutation, and new variants of a virus are expected to occur over time.

So far, studies suggest that antibodies generated through vaccination with currently authorized vaccines recognize these variants. This is being closely investigated and more studies are underway.

“Finding this strain in the Panhandle reinforces the importance of getting your COVID vaccine. Consider it your molecular PPE and one of the best protection against this insidious virus. Now that it’s available to anyone over 18, we urge you to get it,” said Kim Engel, Panhandle Public Health District Director.

Anyone in the Panhandle age 18 and older can get a COVID vaccine. Roughly 35% of Panhandle adults have received the COVID vaccine. People are urged to help friends, family, and neighbors sign up for theirs. This can be done by going to <https://vaccinate.ne.gov> or calling 833-998-2275.

Vaccines are one of the single greatest achievements in public health, be sure to get your COVID shot when it’s your turn. People who are fully COVID vaccinated will not be required to quarantine due to close contact.

If you have received your first dose and have not heard when you will receive your second dose, don’t fret, you will be contacted by the vaccine provider that administered your first dose. If you have lost your COVID vaccine card, go to <https://tinyurl.com/2zh7uhhu>.

Avoid the Three Cs:

- Avoid Crowded Places – Avoid gathering in groups where you cannot maintain 6-feet of distance from others
- Avoid Close Contact – Wear a mask over your nose and mouth or maintain 6-foot distance when you are spending more than 15 total minutes with people you don't live with
- Avoid Confined Spaces – Avoid enclosed spaces with poor ventilation

Current COVID testing access can be found at www.pphd.org.

The Panhandle COVID dashboard is updated weekdays at 4:30 pm MT and available at www.pphd.org. For the most up to date information from the CDC, visit <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>.

Panhandle Public Health District, Region 21, 22, and 23 Emergency Management, and Scotts Bluff County Health Department are working as a unified command on this evolving situation. Essential updates will be regularly communicated to the public and community partners.

Panhandle Public Health District is working together to improve the health, safety, and quality of life for all who live, learn, work, and play in the Panhandle. Our vision is that we are a healthier and safer Panhandle Community. Visit our website www.pphd.org.