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V.I. Elderly are Being Infected With Coronavirus by Young Family Members, V.I.'s Infectious Disease Specialist Says

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The territory's infectious disease physician Dr. Tai Hunte gave residents a dose of 'real talk' at Monday's COVID-19 update as she expressed to young people the dangers of hanging out in public, refusing to wear masks and social distance, to then come home to their elderly family members who are showing up positive with coronavirus and experiencing life-threatening complications.

A resident of St. Thomas, Dr. Hunte said she visits patients with ranging severities of infectious illnesses on a daily basis at the Schneider Regional Medical Center, and conducts telemedicine visits with patients on St. Croix at the Juan Luis Hospital.

“The elderly population and those who have additional comorbid conditions, immunocompromising conditions, diabetes, heart failure, chronic kidney disease, asthma, COPD [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease]—these are our parents, our grandparents, our neighbors, our cousins, our aunts and our uncles—they are the ones who are being predominately, disproportionately affected by the severe effects of coronavirus in the community. Those are the people that are in the hospital,” said Dr. Hunte, referring to the evident impact on the elderly and others classified as at-risk that health officials expected to see months ago when the territory was first touched by the effects of this grave pandemic.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the risk for severe illness from the novel coronavirus increases with age. People 50 and up are at higher risk and the greatest risk for severe illness from COVID-19 is among those aged 85 or older. Click [here](#) for more information on at-risk adult groups and preventative measures everyone can take.

How are the elderly contracting the virus, even though most who are 70 years and up did not report recent travel nor did they leave their homes?

“A lot of the young individuals are becoming positive, but then they’re taking it home,” said Department of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion.

Since the recent spike in numbers following the Limetree Bay outbreak and increased travel into the territory, D.O.H.’s daily infographic show a spike in positive test results over time across age groups 30-49, 50-64, 18-29, and 65 and older, in order of greatest to least positive cases.

“They are serving as vectors. They are transmitting the virus. They are getting infected, and it’s not affecting them, but they’re bringing it home to these elderly people, the loved ones. These are the ones who are being adversely affected, admitted to the hospital, and fighting for their lives. It’s not fair. It’s not right,” as explained by Dr. Hunte.

When the elderly open their homes to their families, they impose greater risk on their own health. Therefore, Ms. Hunte urged residents to interact with others as if everyone is a potential risk. She thus encouraged the territory to understand that just because one may feel indispensable or healthy, they may unknowingly put a loved one at risk.

As the CDC suggests on its website, everyone should take steps to prevent getting and spreading COVID-19 to protect themselves, their communities, and people who are at increased risk of severe illness.

Although the effects of COVID-19 are not as destructive as on the continental United States, the number of people that do come up positive relative to the territory’s population of 110,000 is still a hardship on the Health Department to manage, according to Dr. Hunte. Medications are expensive and chartered planes bring in units of plasma, as needed, to save people’s lives. These are the things that the people do not see but happen behind the scenes, she said.

Latest D.O.H. Coronavirus Data

The V.I. Dept. of Health reported 24 new cases of the novel coronavirus in the U.S. Virgin Islands on Monday, with St. Croix accounting for 17 of the new cases, and St. Thomas 7.

On St. Croix, 11 of the new cases were transmitted through close contact, 3 through community spread, 1 was travel-related, and 2 were under investigation. Four of the 7 cases on St. Thomas were transmitted through community spread, while 3 were close contact.

No new cases were reported on St. John.

There were 91 active cases as of Monday: 46 on St. Croix, 43 on St. Thomas and 2 on St. John.

During an interview with the Consortium Monday morning, Governor Albert Bryan spoke of a shift in his strategy relative to how his administration would combat the virus. Previously, Mr. Bryan had said he would move to the "Safer at Home" phase of reopening, which calls for the curtailment of hotel reservations, among other restrictions, if cases continued to rise — especially if St. Thomas cases grew. But with St. Thomas seeing steady new cases, Mr. Bryan now says the plan is being able to manage new cases.

"That shift comes as a result of remember, when we started doing this, we thought we would be done by summer and then we would be okay. The realization that it's not going to end anytime soon — even if we get a vaccine, we still have another year at least — and coronavirus is going to be around for years. So the most important thing now is being able to manage your hospitals and being able to make sure that people stay alive," the governor said.