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**COVID-19 variant strain B.1.1.7 identified in additional Eau Claire County cases**

**Eau Claire, WI- February 16, 2020** – Two additional individuals who recently tested positive for COVID-19 were found to have the variant strain B.1.1.7. This is the strain that was first discovered circulating widely in England during November and December 2020. Researchers believe that this new strain spreads more rapidly and easily than the original strain of SARS-CoV-2. There is some evidence emerging that the new strain may cause an increased risk of death.

The two individuals are unrelated to one another and to the first case of the variant strain detected in Eau Claire County on January 12, 2021. Their only contacts during their infectious periods were other individuals in their households. The individuals have no travel history and no connection with people who had traveled internationally. Both individuals were isolated during their illness and are now done with their isolation period. One individual is a teenager and the other is in their 50s. Neither individual was hospitalized.

In Wisconsin, cases of B.1.1.7 are identified through ongoing surveillance and whole genome sequencing, a routine practice since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. All viruses, including the virus that causes COVID-19, change through mutation, and new variants of the virus are expected to occur over time.

“With emerging mutations of this virus, including those that may be more infectious, it is critically important to follow best public health practices, including wearing a mask, staying home, maintaining physical distance, washing hands frequently, and getting vaccinated when you become eligible,” said Lieske Giese, Health Department Director. “Slowing the spread of this virus can prevent it from replicating and mutating further.”

The Eau Claire City-County Health Department will not be doing news releases if additional variant strains are found among Eau Claire County residents. Only a small proportion of all COVID-19 tests are sequenced, and it is likely that there are already many more cases of this variant around Wisconsin and surrounding states.

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