

Friday, 23 October 2020

Testing boost after viral fragments detected in Ararat wastewater

Ararat residents who have any symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19), no matter how mild, are urged to get tested after viral fragments were detected in their local wastewater with no residents known to have had a recent COVID-19 illness or diagnosis.

Fragments of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes coronavirus, have also been detected in untreated wastewater samples collected in recent days from wastewater treatment plants at Colac, Gisborne, Kilmore and Shepparton where there are known residents with recent infections.

While the test results may not mean there are currently active cases of COVID-19 in these communities, the Department of Health and Human Services has increased testing with local health services and taken further wastewater samples.

People who have had coronavirus may shed the virus or virus fragments for several weeks on used tissues, off their hands and skin when washing, and in their stool, well beyond their infectious period.

The preliminary positive test result from Ararat is not expected, with no known recent cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) in the area. As with all wastewater testing, it may be because of someone local who is shedding the virus or from a visitor to the area.

While the other positive wastewater test results are in line with recent known cases of coronavirus (COVID-19), the most recent cases in the Colac and Gisborne areas, including New Gisborne, Macedon and Mt Macedon, are nearing the end of the typical shedding period.

A pop-up testing site has been established at East Grampians Health Service on Girdleston St, Ararat, from Friday 23 October to Sunday 25 October. It will be open from 9.30am to 5pm. For a full list of testing locations, visit <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/where-get-tested-covid-19>.

Wastewater testing provides an additional and complementary tool to the existing public health response and can provide early warning that coronavirus is in a community.

Victoria this month increased its surveillance of wastewater. Samples are now taken from 42 wastewater treatment plants across Victoria with additional sites recently at Bacchus Marsh, Bairnsdale, Cowes, Gisborne, Hamilton, Horsham, Kilmore, Melton, Portland and Warrnambool.

Victoria's Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton said finding cases early can help the Department's disease detectives track the spread of the virus and implement strategies to minimise transmission.

In September, testing was stepped up in the Apollo Bay area and then in the Anglesea area after virus fragments were detected in the towns' wastewater despite no known local people with recent coronavirus infection. With several weeks passing since detection at both sites, it is unlikely that there are active undiagnosed cases in the area.

"Wastewater testing may indicate there are undiagnosed cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) in Ararat and we are erring on the side of caution by increasing the availability of testing in the area," Professor Sutton said.

"Anyone feeling unwell with even the mildest of symptoms should get tested as soon as possible and isolate as they wait for their result."

Victoria is part of a national collaboration for sewage surveillance for SARS-CoV-2, known as ColoSSoS. Coordinated by Water Research Australia, the project brings together health departments, water utilities, laboratories and researchers from Australia and New Zealand to share advances in this rapidly evolving field.

Wastewater samples used for testing are taken at the influent (or entry pipe) to wastewater treatment plants. The viral fragments themselves are not infectious. There is no evidence that coronavirus (COVID-19) can be spread via recycled water nor via treated wastewater released to waterways.

There is also no impact on local water supplies. Drinking water supplied by water utilities is safe to drink and be used for normal household purposes.

More information on wastewater testing is on the Department of Health and Human Services website:
<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/wastewater-testing-covid-19>

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