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COLMBUS, Ohio - State officials detected increased levels of coronavirus in sewage in a number of cities -- including Akron, Mansfield and Oregon, outside Toledo – before the number of diagnosed cases spiked up in each locale.

That's according to Rebecca Fugitt, assistant chief of the Ohio Bureau of Environmental Health and Radiation at the Ohio Department of Health, who is involved in the project of testing wastewater systems throughout the state. Fugitt spoke about the issue Tuesday during Gov. Mike DeWine's coronavirus briefing.

A similar relationship between wastewater and prison cases has also been identified in Ohio.

When people first get coronavirus, they begin shedding it before they even begin experiencing symptoms of the illness, Fugitt said. And it shows up in sewage.

Research suggests – and state data confirms – that an increase in cases occurs four to seven days after higher levels of COVID-19 gene fragments are detected in wastewater.

During DeWine's briefing, Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction Director Annette Chambers-Smith said wastewater is being tested at the state prisons and a similar relationship has been found between wastewater COVID-19 increases and case diagnoses.

"It looks like it's about seven days," Chambers-Smith said. "And that's precious time for us to plan. We're using it as an early warning system."

Wastewater data helps prison officials determine whether they'll allow normal levels of visiting and how to space inmates together, she said.

Chambers-Smith announced she will sign an executive order mandating staff get tested when coronavirus gene copies in wastewater is up, or if the positivity rates of prison staff or prisoners go up. She's looking to bring testing facilities to prisons, since many staff work double shifts and she doesn't want to burden them with a new requirement after work.

Currently, 79 staff members are positive at Ohio prisons; and 266 inmates are positive, she said.

This story will be updated.