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Alaska reports first probable H1N1-related death of a child

Officials encourage Alaskans to be vigilant in flu preparedness

(Anchorage, AK) — A 10-year old Fairbanks child has died from symptoms of probable H1N1 (swine flu) virus. A school nurse sent the child home around noon on Sept. 3, 2009, with flu symptoms and the child was admitted to the Fairbanks Memorial Hospital overnight. After not responding well to treatment, the child was transported to Providence Alaska Medical Center in Anchorage and was pronounced dead late in the evening on Sept. 4, 2009. The child was a student of Hunter Elementary School in the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District.

"The death of any child is particularly tragic, and our sympathies go out to the family," said Department of Health and Social Services Commissioner Bill Hogan. "Everyone acted quickly to get this child help. Despite this sad outcome, this shows how important school nurses and others on the front lines are to getting people with flu symptoms the help they need."

"Our thoughts and prayers go out to the family of the student," said Fairbanks North Star Borough Superintendent of Schools Nancy Wagner. "This is truly a tragic incident and a tragic day for one of our families. We will continue to work closely with the Department of Education and Early Development and the Department of Health and Social Services to monitor flu conditions so we can make the best decisions about student health and safety."

Acting state Public Health Director Deborah Erickson said, "Although most people who get H1N1 flu have a mild illness and quick recovery, this death is a sobering reminder that it can be a serious illness. We all need to pay attention and do what we can to help reduce the spread of the virus."

The state has advised schools to take the following precautions related to the flu this fall:

- Students and staff should stay home if they are sick
- Separate ill students and staff until they can go home
- Encourage regular hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette
- Encourage routine cleaning of hard surfaces that are frequently touched
- Encourage early treatment of high-risk persons

School closure is not recommended at this time unless the number of sick faculty members or students interferes with the school's ability to function. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also recommends that schools provide time for students to wash their hands whenever necessary and make tissues readily available to students and staff.

Unrelated to this case, an infant with pre-existing medical conditions died this past week in Anchorage from complications possibly related to H1N1 flu. State officials are currently investigating this case.

The state of Alaska has been told by the CDC that the first shipment of H1N1 vaccine will arrive in the state by mid-October. Initial supplies of the vaccine will be targeted for high priority groups. The state of Alaska is currently holding workshops in local communities to assist those communities in planning to distribute the H1N1 vaccine when it becomes available.

Flu symptoms (both regular seasonal flu and novel H1N1 flu) include fever, cough, sore throat, chills, runny nose, fatigue, body aches, headache and sometimes vomiting and diarrhea. Those with flu-like illness should stay home for at least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever, without use of fever-reducing medicines and regardless of whether or not they are using antiviral drugs.

Other everyday actions to take to prevent the spread of viruses:

- Cough or sneeze into your sleeve, or cover your nose and mouth with a tissue. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hands cleaners are also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread that way.
- Stay home if you get sick. The CDC recommends that you stay home from work or school and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them.

More health information on H1N1 can be found at <http://www.pandemicflu.alaska.gov/>.

To view the school/parent H1N1 Web site developed by the Alaska Department of Education, please visit: <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/>.

DHSS is now on Twitter. Follow health updates at www.twitter.com/Alaska_DHSS.

Categories of Health Alert messages:

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Health Advisory provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

Health Update provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.

This message is sent to you as a service of the State of Alaska DHSS, Division of Public Health, through the Section of Epidemiology, P.O. Box 240249, Anchorage, Alaska 99524-0249, (907) 269-8000. The Section of Epidemiology maintains a 24-hour Emergency Number, 1-800-478-0084. Internet site: <http://www.epi.Alaska.gov>