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Press Release

COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE

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Public Health responds to sick children in Kotzebue

Enterovirus identified as probable cause of illness

(Anchorage, AK) — Two Public Health nurse epidemiologists with the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services flew to Kotzebue on Sept. 10, 2007, in response to the report of sick infants from communities in the Maniilaq region. The infants, all less than 2 months old, were brought to the regional hospital over the past 14 days with viral-like symptoms that included fever and respiratory distress. Some infants also had meningitis, and inflammation around the heart and in the heart muscle, consistent with a viral infection.

As of Sept. 12, there were nine reported cases, all of which required hospitalization. Five of those hospitalized in Kotzebue were transported to the Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage for further treatment.

Hospital staff submitted stool and swab samples for laboratory testing, and one of the samples tested positive for an enterovirus. Although this single test result is not conclusive, the pattern of illness in these very young infants is consistent with enteroviral infections. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, enteroviruses are very common, second only to the "common cold" viruses in humans. While everyone is at risk for infection, infants, children and adolescents are more susceptible. Enteroviruses can be found in the mucus or stool of an infected person and are usually passed by contact with contaminated surfaces or by improper hand washing following diaper changes.

“Although there are no medicines available to treat enteroviruses, knowing what is causing the outbreak helps the medical community treat the symptoms and informs public health officials about how to appropriately respond in order to slow the spread of the disease,” said Dr. Beth Funk, Public Health medical epidemiologist. “Thorough and frequent hand washing is the best way to prevent the spread of enteroviruses. Hands should be washed before preparing or eating food and after diaper changes or using the toilet. If running water is not readily available we recommend the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers.”

The division will continue to monitor the number of reported cases from the Kotzebue area and will be looking for any additional cases from other communities around the state.

For more information, go to <http://www.epi.hss.state.ak.us/>, or if people have health concerns they should contact their local physician.

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