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Press Release

COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE

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Virus infects Western Alaska

RSV sends numerous children to hospital; health officials respond

(Anchorage, AK) — State, city and tribal health officials, and various hospitals and clinics across the state are responding to a seasonal outbreak of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) in Western Alaska.

Seasonal RSV outbreaks occur nationwide during the winter months, and cause hundreds of children to be hospitalized in Alaska every year. According to information collected by the Alaska Division of Public Health's Epidemiology section, more than 82 children in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region have been evaluated by a health-care provider for suspected or confirmed RSV illness, and at least 47 have been hospitalized since Jan. 1, 2008. One of the children required mechanical ventilation, and none have died. While the seasonal RSV outbreak in the Y-K Delta region is more robust than usual so far this year, fortunately the number of patients with severe illness has been low.

Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Anchorage Department of Health and Human Services, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Regional Hospital are cooperating in their response to the outbreak.

RSV illness begins most frequently with fever, runny nose, cough and sometimes wheezing. During their first RSV infection, between 25 percent and 40 percent of infants and young children have signs or symptoms of bronchial inflammation or pneumonia, and up to 2 percent require hospitalization. Most children recover from illness in eight to 15 days.

RSV is spread through close contact with infected persons or contact with contaminated surfaces or objects. The best way to prevent the spread of RSV is by following proper hand-washing techniques, practicing proper cough etiquette and by avoiding contact between persons. Hands should be washed for at least 30 seconds with soap and hot running water. If water is not available, an alcohol-based hand sanitizer is recommended. Coughing or sneezing should be done into your sleeve or tissue, followed by hand washing. Children with cold or flu-like symptoms should be kept home.

State and municipal emergency response staff are monitoring the outbreak and preparing to send necessary medical supplies or staff to any locations requiring additional assistance.

For more information on RSV go to the state's Epidemiology Web site at <http://www.epi.hss.state.ak.us/> or call the state EPI Hotline at (907) 269-8000 during working hours.

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