State of Alaska Epidemiology **Bulletin**

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Influenza Virus Brings Season's Sniffles to Alaska

Alaska's first laboratory-confirmed case of influenza in this winter's flu season was a Juneau patient who became ill on November 3. By December 29, 22 isolates of influenza virus were confirmed by the State Laboratory; all but four cases occurred after December 15. Of the cases, 8 were in Fairbanks, 5 in Anchorage, 2 in Nome, 2 in McGrath, and one each in Glennallen, Gambell, Gakona, Cordova, and Juneau.

All cases have been type A; so far, 4 have been confirmed type A/Beijing virus. Prior to mid-December, the laboratory had identified mostly parainfluenza virus (mostly type I); enterovirus, adenovirus, and coxsackievirus were also identified.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that levels of influenza activity were higher than normal for the month of November. Type A isolates predominated.

Prevention

Vaccination usually results in protective levels of antibody 2 weeks following administration. The Section of Epidemiology recommends that nursing homes and facilities housing elderly persons ensure that their residents have received vaccine.

Because of the predominance of type A virus, the antiviral drugs amantadine and rimantadine may be successful in preventing illness in unvaccinated persons or in recently vaccinated persons. In studies with otherwise healthy young adults and children, amantadine has been proven to be 70-90% effective in preventing illness caused by naturally occurring strains of type A influenza virus if administered prior to and throughout an epidemic period.

Surveillance

The Section of Epidemiology strongly encourages physicians to participate in influenza virus surveillance. Knowing regional trends of viral illnesses helps health care providers to identify optimal prevention and treatment strategies.

Successful isolation of influenza virus is increased if nasal washes or nasopharyngeal swabs are collected from patients during the first 1-3 days of their illness. Culture materials and viral testing are available free-of-charge. Culture materials may be obtained from any of the three State Public Health Laboratories located in Juneau, Fairbanks, and Anchorage; testing is performed in Fairbanks.

Unusual occurrences of influenza-like illness, particularly illness outbreaks among vulnerable people such as nursing home residents or hospital patients, should be reported immediately to the Section of Epidemiology.

Alaska Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System

The Alaska Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS) Project, an ongoing survey of mothers of newborns conducted by the Alaska Division of Public Health, provides additional information on the health risk behaviors and circumstances of pregnant women. Data from 2,975 mothers whose babies were born in Alaska during 1990 and 1991. These data became available for analysis in November 1993 and have been weighted to reflect the total statewide population of Alaskan women with live births during this period. Overall, 92% of respondents reported that a doctor or nurse had asked them about their alcohol consumption. One-in-20 mothers (5%) reported they were not asked by their prenatal care provider if they drank alcoholic beverages. Only 77% reported that a doctor or nurse counseled them about the effects of drinking on their baby. One-in-6 mothers (18%) who drank during the third trimester reported that a doctor or nurse did not counsel them about possible effects of drinking during pregnancy.

For additional information about the Alaska PRAMS Project, or to be placed on the Alaska PRAMS mailing list, contact: MaryAnn Vandecastle, Alaska Division of Public Health, Section of Maternal, Child and Family Health, P.O. Box 110612, Juneau, AK 99811-0612.