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Summer Influenza A Hits Alaska*

Since July 26, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Health Canada, in cooperation with local public health authorities, have been investigating reports of febrile respiratory illness and associated pneumonia occurring among persons traveling on land and sea, both independently and on tour packages, in Alaska and the Yukon Territory. Commonly reported symptoms include fever and cough; laboratory evidence suggests that influenza A infection may be a cause of many of the illnesses. Summertime outbreaks of influenza A have previously occurred among tourists in the United States and Canada (1-2).

A CDC/Health Canada investigation team, with assistance and cooperation of the cruise ship industry, has identified 861 cases of acute respiratory illness, including 29 cases of pneumonia, among cruise ship passengers and crew sailing between Vancouver, BC and Alaska during June 6 to August 10. One person, a 79-year-old woman traveling alone on a cruise ship, died shortly after becoming ill with a febrile respiratory illness following the cruise. The median age of ill persons was 56 years (range: 1-89 years); the median age of those with pneumonia was 72 years (range: 55-88 years).

Many cases have occurred in clusters, particularly among groups of 40-50 passengers sharing common transportation and accommodation packages on overland tours between Anchorage and either Skagway or Seward. Affected passengers have traveled on several different tours from different companies. Information from case reports suggests that after touring inland, ill persons are boarding cruise ships, possibly resulting in further spread. In some instances, travelers are becoming ill and seeking medical attention only after returning home. Interestingly, although there is anecdotal information suggesting possible acute respiratory illness among some tour company employees, there is no evidence indicating either widespread or increased respiratory illness activity among the general population of Alaska.

During June-September, up to 70,000 overland tour and cruise ship passengers visit Alaska and the Yukon Territory each week. Most travelers are not experiencing febrile respiratory illness and no special prevention measures are recommended at this time for travelers in good health.

CDC and Health Canada have established a system for selected hospital emergency rooms (and other health care providers) and cruise ship medical departments to report acute febrile respiratory illness and collect and submit diagnostic specimens for testing. Nine facilities in Alaska are participating in the CDC/Health Canada system (Table 1).

Table 1. Alaska health care providers included in the CDC/Health Canada acute respiratory illness reporting and specimen collection system.

Alaska Regional Hospital (Anchorage)
Bartlett Regional Hospital (Juneau)
Elmendorf Air Force Base Hospital
Fairbanks Memorial Hospital
Ketchikan General Hospital
Providence Hospital (Anchorage)
Providence Seward Hospital
Sitka Community Hospital
Skagway Medical Clinic

In order to determine if influenza is occurring in the general population of Alaska, **the Section of Epidemiology encourages Alaska health-care providers not participating in the CDC/Health Canada system to collect nasal washes, nasopharyngeal swabs, or throat swabs from patients 1-3 days after onset of influenza-like symptoms (fever accompanied by sore throat or cough).** Culture materials are available free-of-charge from the State public health laboratories in Anchorage (907-274-1602) and Fairbanks (907-474-7017). Viral cultures and isolation are performed free-of-charge. Please telephone either of the State public health laboratories if you would like to submit specimens and need supplies or information on specimen collection or shipping.

The CDC/Health Canada investigation team can be reached in Anchorage at 907-729-3431 (fax 907-729-3429) or e-mail SITEAM@cdc.gov

References:

1. CDC. Outbreak of influenza-like illness in a tour group, Alaska. MMWR 1987;36(42):697-8,704.
2. Miller J, Tam T, Aff C, Maloney S, Cetron M, Fukuda K, et.al. Influenza A outbreak on a cruise-ship. Canada Communicable Disease Report. 1998; 24(2):9-11.

*Portions of this report were adapted from: CDC. Outbreak of influenza A infection - Alaska and the Yukon Territory, June-July 1998. MMWR 1998;47(30):638.