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Influenza - United States, Alaska

Since November 1979, influenza B viruses have been isolated in 15 states, including Alaska. In each state only sporadic activity has been noted. Infections seem to be primarily in children however isolates have come from adults, including the elderly. No widespread outbreaks of influenza-like illness have been reported in the United States, although regional outbreaks were reported by Idaho and Oregon in early January.

An influenza A/Texas/1/77(H3N2)-like strain was isolated from a 14-year-old boy in Chicago on December 26. This appeared to be a sporadic case.

In Alaska influenza B isolates have originated from Fairbanks and Petersburg, the first isolates occurring in late December. Petersburg, Wrangell, and Cordova reportedly have had community-wide outbreaks mainly affecting children but not entirely sparing adults. Confirmed influenza B has not to date been reported in Anchorage although sporadic clinically compatible cases are reported.

Typical of influenza B is the focal nature of the current influenza activity. Also the illness is generally milder than that caused by influenza A viruses, which also causes more widespread illness among susceptibles as demonstrated by school absenteeism in January of 1979.

An interesting observation made in Cordova was the increase in "croup-like" illness. This has been previously noted during influenza outbreaks and it is frequently more severe than "croup" caused by parainfluenza. Influenza should be thought of in children with "croup", especially if the illness seems unusually severe.

It is important to identify where and when influenza is occurring and to identify the virus. The elderly and individuals with chronic diseases predisposing to serious sequela such as pneumonia should be aware of their increased risk, especially if unvaccinated, during the time influenza is present in a community. By identifying the agent epidemiologic knowledge of influenza behavior is broadened thus making plans for the following years vaccine production much easier. Furthermore new strains can be identified and appropriate changes made in vaccine composition.