



Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: October 14, 2011

Contact: Rahul Gupta, MD, MPH, FACP – Health Officer

Phone: (304) 348-6494

Viral Meningitis in Kanawha County

The Kanawha-Charleston Health Department (KCHD) has been investigating calls from concerned parents and school officials regarding an illness occurring in children with symptoms of high fever, headache, and sometimes nausea and vomiting over the past several weeks. In some cases, these children have been diagnosed with viral meningitis, an inflammation of the membranes that cover the brain and spinal cord.

According to Brandon Merritt, Regional Epidemiologist for KCHD, all reports from the community of any unusual illness are followed up to determine the cause and severity of the illness and to identify if outbreaks are occurring.

Merritt stated, “Over the course of our investigation, we have contacted healthcare providers, school nursing staff and officials, hospitals and parents of children that are reported to have contracted the illness. Our investigation has revealed that a significant proportion of the viral meningitis cases in our community have been caused by enteroviruses, which are very common in the summer and fall months. In fact, enteroviruses are the second most common viruses in humans, behind the ‘common cold’ viruses.”

In the United States, enteroviruses cause an estimated 10 – 15 million symptomatic infections a year. Like most viruses, they are spread from person to person through contact with respiratory secretions or the stool of an infected person. The viruses can also be spread by direct contact from contaminated surfaces or objects such as a drinking glass or telephone. Most people who have the virus have no symptoms and don’t know they are contagious. Of those who do become ill, most will have mild respiratory symptoms like a cold or flu-like illness. Only about 5-10% of the people who become ill will require medical attention. Less often, people can develop viral meningitis as a complication of the illness. Children are generally at greater risk because they have had less time to build up immunity than adults.

It is important to note that it is the viruses that are contagious from person to person, not the meningitis. If you are around someone with viral meningitis, you may be at risk of becoming infected with the virus that made them sick, however, you have only a small chance of developing meningitis. Very few people with enterovirus infections develop meningitis.

Typical symptoms of meningitis include a sudden onset of fever, headache, stiff neck, and may be accompanied by nausea, vomiting, or sensitivity to light. If symptoms occur, see a doctor immediately. Viral meningitis is much more common than bacterial meningitis and is generally less severe, usually resolving without specific treatment. Antibiotics are not effective and should not be used to treat viral infections. There are no specific vaccines to prevent viral meningitis, although certain vaccines can protect against some types of bacterial meningitis and it is therefore very important that everyone, especially children, stay up-to-date on their immunizations.

“Prevention is key,” says Merritt, “Disinfecting commonly touched surfaces is important, but the surfaces can be easily recontaminated after cleaning. That’s why frequent hand washing and alcohol-based hand sanitizers are the most effective ways to help reduce your chances of becoming ill from viruses and bacteria.”

Additional information about meningitis can be found on the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department’s website at www.kchdvw.org or by contacting the Division of Epidemiology at 304-348-1088.

###