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Health Secretary Says Clusters of Influenza-like Illness in Schools Expected Department of Health Investigates Clusters of Illness in Two Schools

(Santa Fe) – Health Secretary Alfredo Vigil, MD, said today that New Mexico is seeing clusters of influenza-like illness in two schools, which was expected with the start of school and is likely due to the continued spread of H1N1 influenza. The Department of Health works with the Public Education Department to make sure schools are doing what they can to reduce the spread of disease.

“We anticipated seeing clusters of flu illness when school began because H1N1 flu activity has continued throughout the summer,” Dr. Vigil said. “We are making sure schools are prepared to respond appropriately to ill students and staff, and we encourage parents to keep their children at home if they are sick with a fever, cough and/or a sore throat.”

The Department of Health is investigating clusters of influenza-like illness in students from Los Alamos and Kirtland, near Farmington. The investigation is at the beginning, and the Department has not yet confirmed whether the illness is H1N1.

A local health care provider reported on Aug. 21 that 20 children from Los Alamos Middle School had flu-like symptoms. Among Kirtland Early Childhood Center’s kindergarten classes, a school nurse reported on Aug. 21 that 13 children had flu-like symptoms. A Los Alamos school nurse reported today that more than 100 children stayed home sick, about an 18 percent absentee rate among the 600 children who attend the school.

“Superintendents and school principals have been receiving the latest information on H1N1 virus and prevention strategies,” said Education Secretary Veronica C. Garcia. “School closures will be based on a collaborative decision made by me, Secretary Vigil, and the superintendent of the school district. I encourage all educators to follow prevention steps outlined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Department of Health. CDC guidelines for school closures have changed since last spring, and the federal agency has determined school closures are not the best option in most cases. National and local recommendations could change based on any changes in disease severity.”

The Department of Health follows the recommendations of the CDC while also considering what is happening locally. CDC’s guidance to schools is designed to keep schools open while they do what they can to protect students and staff. Recommendations include:

- The best ways to prevent influenza are getting vaccinated, frequent hand washing with soap and water when possible, covering noses and mouths with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and staying home when sick.
- Students and staff with flu-like illness should stay home and away from other people for at least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever, without using a fever-reducing medicine.
- School staff should routinely clean areas that students and staff touch often with the cleaners they typically use. Special cleaning with bleach is unnecessary.
- Students and staff who appear to have flu-like illness should be sent to a room separate from other students until they can be sent home.

The Department of Health recommends parents should check their children each morning for influenza-like illness (fever, cough, and/or sore throat) and keep children home if they have a fever. It's important for parents to keep their children at home for 24 hours after a fever breaks without using a fever-reducing medication. People should stay home from work if they are ill with influenza-like symptoms as well.

The Department of Health is planning vaccination clinics for H1N1 influenza when vaccine becomes available. The CDC expects to begin shipping vaccine as early as mid-October. This year, people need to get vaccinated against H1N1 flu and seasonal flu.

The Department plans to vaccinate priority groups first. The CDC developed priority groups based on people who are the most likely to develop complications from H1N1 flu and or spread the disease to vulnerable individuals. They are:

- Pregnant women
- People who live with or care for children younger than 6 months old
- Children and young adults age 6 months through 24 years
- Healthcare workers and emergency medical services personnel
- People age 25 through 64 years who have health conditions associated with higher risk of medical complications from influenza

Due to the increase in the number of vaccinations needed this fall, the Department is recruiting volunteer healthcare professionals who can help with vaccination clinics or to potentially respond to an emergency. To volunteer, look up <http://www.nmserves.org/> or call Bobbie MacKenzie at 505-476-8302.

So far, there have been 26 hospitalizations and one death due to H1N1 in New Mexico. A 45-year-old woman in Sierra County who had a medical condition that put her at high risk for flu complications died earlier this month. For information on H1N1, look up <http://nmhealth.org/H1N1/index.shtml>.

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