

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 21, 2009

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PARENTS SHOULD PREPARE STUDENTS NOW FOR INCREASED FLU ACTIVITY

(RICHMOND, Va.)— Parents of school-age children should prepare now for the possibility of increased flu activity as students return to class this fall. Virginia Department of Health Commissioner Karen Remley, M.D., MBA, had that message for the Virginia Parents Teachers Association this past week when 600 members of the statewide organization were in Richmond for their annual leadership conference.

“We are continuing to see higher reports of influenza-like illness throughout the state than we normally would see for this time of the year,” Commissioner Remley said. “The highest percentage of those reports is among children.”

While most reports of the novel Influenza A (H1N1) virus indicate that its impact is moderate, the Commissioner noted that viruses are highly unpredictable and can mutate into a more serious form in a short period of time.

“A community-wide response is the key to adequately protecting our population from serious disease,” the Commissioner said. “I would ask families, for instance, to ensure that their children receive all recommended immunizations.”

Families also need to think about how they would manage a situation when a child may be home with the flu for several days this fall. The Commissioner suggested, for example, that families talk with friends or neighbors to arrange for the sharing of child care responsibilities, especially in single parent families or in those families in which both parents work.

Michelle Prescott, the Virginia PTA’s Health and Safety Chairperson, said it is very important for school communities to know now about what could happen when the new year begins and to also know what they can do to contain the spread of the H1N1 virus and limit its impact.

“For example, Commissioner Remley pointed out that children or teachers may have symptoms for as little as one day but be contagious for a longer period of time. Parents may be tempted to send children back to school when they are feeling better but are still contagious. The same is true for teachers who may want to return to school sooner than they should,” Ms. Prescott said.

Commissioner Remley said that planning for the impact of the H1N1 virus would not only help schools but businesses as well. “Our business leaders also need to be thinking about how they will maintain operations in the event of widespread absenteeism among employees or suppliers,” Dr. Remley said.

The Commissioner said that a vaccine for H1N1 will soon undergo clinical trials and could be available by mid-October.

“Many of us remember how widespread diseases such as polio, measles and chickenpox once were among children,” Commissioner Remley said. “Today these diseases are both preventable and relatively rare because of vaccines. Vaccines are the single most powerful and cost-effective public health measure ever developed. As will be the case with a H1N1 vaccine, vaccines are constantly monitored for safety and efficacy and will be a necessary part of prevention.”

The Commissioner said it is important for Virginians to receive the regular seasonal flu vaccine this fall and also to plan for the possibility of an additional H1N1 vaccine later in the year.

With reports of influenza-like illness in the Commonwealth continuing, all Virginians and especially those with influenza-like symptoms that include fever, cough, sore throat, headache, chills, fatigue and body aches should:

- Stay home from work and school and limit their contact with others to keep from spreading the virus
- Cover their nose and mouth when they cough or sneeze and throw the tissue in the trash
- Wash their hands often with soap and water, especially after they cough or sneeze. Use of alcohol-based hand cleaners also is effective.
- Limit close contact with sick people
- Prevent the spread of germs by not touching their eyes, nose or mouth
- Call their health care provider if they have questions or concerns

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