



Public Health Mōno-Gram

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Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

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Possible exposure to chickenpox at Mammoth Elementary and Middle School

What are the facts as we know them as of this moment?

Late Friday afternoon, the Health Department was notified of a probable case of chickenpox in a student attending Mammoth Elementary School. An additional case has been identified, and more are suspected in both the Elementary School and the Middle School. The students have had social contact in the classroom, the hallways, the cafeteria, the playground, and the office. The students are now at home and doing well. We ask you to assist us by respecting our obligation to protect the identity and privacy of the persons and of the families involved. There are many rumors circulating as to the identity of the students and the possibility of other cases (indicating a possible "outbreak"). Please verify any information you receive with school officials. We will keep the schools updated as the situation changes, and will work with school personnel to keep you informed.

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a disease caused by infection with the varicella zoster virus, which causes fever and an itchy skin rash of blister-like spots, covering the body but usually more concentrated on the face, head, chest, and back. Most, but not all, infected individuals have fever, which develops just before or when the rash appears. If exposed, persons who have been vaccinated against the disease may get a milder illness, with less severe rash (sometimes involving only a few red bumps that look similar to insect bites) and mild or no fever. Complications may include severe skin infection, scars, pneumonia, brain damage, or death. Adolescents and adults, and persons who are immune compromised or pregnant, are more at risk for severe disease. It is spread by coughing and sneezing (highly contagious), by direct contact, and by virus from spots on the skin being carried in the air.

Isn't chickenpox a mild disease?

Prior to the licensing of the chickenpox vaccine in 1995, almost all persons in the United States had suffered from chickenpox by adulthood. Each year, the virus caused an estimated 4 million cases of chickenpox, 11,000 hospitalizations, and 100-150 deaths. So, for most people, it is a mild disease. However, we are concerned locally because of the risk of complications caused by the Group A streptococcus bacteria, the cause of "strep throat". Chickenpox is a summer disease, and "strep" is usually a fall and winter disease, but it has persisted throughout the summer in Mono County.

But hasn't a vaccine wiped out the disease?

The availability of the chickenpox vaccine and its subsequent widespread use has had a major impact on reducing cases of chickenpox and related illness, hospitalizations, and deaths. In some areas, cases have decreased as much as 90% over prevaccination numbers. But it has not disappeared. Every year there are outbreaks in California, and most of them occur in elementary schools. If vaccination against chickenpox were

to stop, the disease would eventually return to prevaccination rates, with virtually all susceptible persons becoming infected with the virus at some point in their lives.

What have we (Health Department) done?

We have investigated the reports we have received in order to sort out fact from fiction (rumor). We have confirmed that there are two probable cases, and reports of a number of suspect cases. We have discussed our recommendations with other physicians and with school officials in order to develop a consensus of opinion. There will be an on-going investigation, with changes to our decisions as the evolving situation dictates. We will be in frequent contact with school officials. We have recommended to the families and to the school, that the students who has been identified as having a probable case of chickenpox be excluded from school until Monday, Sep. 12, which will cover the possible period of being contagious.

What should you do?

1. Any student or staff member who becomes ill with an illness consistent with chickenpox in the next three weeks should be excluded from school, and should seek medical care to confirm a diagnosis. If confirmed, they should be excluded from school for at least the following 5-7 days, or until the last spots are crusted and dry.
2. Any student or staff member who is immune compromised or pregnant should contact their healthcare provider immediately for advice regarding the possible exposure. No vaccine should be administered to these individuals, but exclusion from school until Sep 26th should be considered. The Health Officer is available 24/7 for consultation with healthcare providers.
3. Any physician suspecting a case in an individual of any age is asked to call the Health Officer 24/7.
4. There are a small number of students attending Mammoth Elementary and Middle Schools who have never received a chickenpox vaccine (by parental choice). They should be identified by school staff, and should be excluded from school for the next 3 weeks, or until Monday Sep 26th, unless they bring written proof of having received a chickenpox vaccination. They are at high risk for developing chickenpox, and if so, of infecting other students or staff. Once they have received a dose of vaccine, they may return to school the same day.
5. We recommend that ALL students (and staff) have written evidence of having received 2 chickenpox vaccinations, or of having had the disease. Receipt of a single dose of vaccine is required for school entry in California, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the California Department of Public Health, the Mono County Health Department, and the Sierra Park Pediatrics Clinic physicians all recommend a second dose be given between the ages of 4-6 years, preferably prior to school entry. We strongly recommend that you check with your healthcare provider to determine if your child meets these recommendations. If not, we would recommend that you take your child in for the second vaccination as soon as possible. The Health Department has a limited number of doses available to assist you in meeting this recommendation.

(Items #4 and 5 are supported by the fact that 70-100% of outbreaks can be prevented and/or stopped by giving the vaccine to all who have not already had 2 doses. Outbreaks once started often last for 6 months.)

References:

California Health and Safety Code 120175: The Health Officer is authorized to take measures as may be necessary to prevent and to control the spread of communicable disease.

CDC Vaccine Preventable Disease Surveillance Manual, 5th Edition, July, 2011, Varicella, Chapter 17

Varicella Case and Outbreak "Quicksheet", California Department of Public Health, February 2007