

Mystery Illness Strikes Hundreds of Children

Hundreds of children in several states have been stricken by a serious respiratory illness and federal health officials said on Monday that they have confirmed an unusual strain of virus in some children 6 weeks to 16 years old.

Clusters of respiratory illnesses have been seen in Kansas City and Chicago, and at least 10 more states are working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to track the illnesses to determine if they are caused by enterovirus D68, said Anne Schuchat, director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases at the CDC.

"The situation is evolving quickly," Schuchat said in a conference call with reporters. "We are in a stage where it is difficult to say just how big this is, how long it will go on for and how widespread it will be."

There is no specific treatment for the virus, also called HEV 68. It was first detected in the United States in 1962 and is somewhat rare. But it can cause severe respiratory problems, and has been linked to neurological problems, and could be fatal in severe cases. No deaths have yet been reported with this outbreak, said Schuchat.

More than 300 cases of serious respiratory illness have been reported at a pediatric hospital in Kansas City, Missouri, and 15 percent of those children needed treatment in intensive care, according to the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services. Hospitals in St. Louis are also seeing a spike in pediatric respiratory illnesses, the department said.

The CDC tested specimens taken from the children, and so far has found that 19 of 22 cases in Kansas City and 11 from 14 specimens from Chicago were positive for enterovirus D68.

Schuchat said she could not confirm which states the CDC is working with other than Missouri and Illinois. But suspected outbreaks are also being explored in Kansas, Kentucky, Iowa, Colorado, Ohio, Oklahoma, North Carolina, and Georgia, Mark Pallansch, the director of the CDC's Division of Viral Diseases, said in an interview with CNN.

In Columbus, Ohio, since the Labor Day weekend there has been a 40 percent rise in children with respiratory symptoms who do not have influenza, Mysheika Williams Roberts, medical director and assistant commissioner at Columbus Public Health, told Reuters. Ohio hospitals are not able to test for HEV 68 and so are awaiting test results from the CDC, she said.

Additional reporting by Kim Palmer in Cleveland, Ohio; editing by Grant McCool

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