



MUMPS SPREADS IN COLLEGES IN MIDWEST

April 26, 2006

The biggest outbreak of the mumps virus in more than 20 years has affected Midwestern states, and the disease is still spreading.

Mumps is a contagious but short-lived viral disease that most commonly affects the salivary glands in the mouth. It's not usually life threatening, but it can have serious complications in teens.

"We have mumps every year," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Julie Gerberding said in a press conference last week. "We see cases from time to time. What is unique here is that we have a cycle of transmission that has resulted in a conspicuous outbreak and one that seems to be extending further and further across communities at risk."

Less than 300 cases of mumps were reported in the United States each year between 2001 and 2005, but in the past four months, more than 1,500 people have been suspected or confirmed to have the virus. And the number of diagnosed cases has doubled in the past two weeks.

"We are not going to be surprised if there are more cases in more states," Gerberding said.

Tracking the disease among students

Half of the people who have been infected in this outbreak are 17 to 25 years old, and about one third of the people infected are students.

The majority of mumps cases are in Iowa, where health officials believe the outbreak began in December 2005. The CDC, the federal organization responsible for protecting the health of Americans, thinks the disease first spread in Iowa colleges, then broke out of the state when two infected Iowans traveled by plane about a month ago.

Mumps spreads like the common cold, through sneezes and coughs, and from shared surfaces where mucus particles could be left behind and picked up by another person -- a process called "fomite transmission." This explains why the virus can spread so quickly in situations where people are close together, such as planes and classrooms.

Diseases like chicken pox, tuberculosis and mononucleosis also can be spread in the classroom.

It could be two or three weeks between the time a person catches the mumps virus and the time he starts showing symptoms, but once infected, the virus usually lasts about one week.

Mumps rarely causes death -- no one has died in this outbreak -- but it can have some serious consequences.

About one-tenth of people infected with mumps will develop meningitis, an inflammation of the membranes that cover the brain and spinal cord. But, more commonly, people will get fever or pain from swollen glands. The most common symptom is the inflammation of the saliva glands.

Vaccinations can suppress outbreaks

Mumps is untreatable, but the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccination, usually received as two shots during childhood, has an effectiveness of about 90 percent, according to the CDC.

The CDC said many Iowa college students may not have received their second doses of MMR, since Iowa didn't require a second shot until the early '90s. All but four states require at least one MMR vaccination before students are allowed to attend school.

Before the MMR vaccination began in 1967, mumps was hundreds of times more common. More than 100,000 cases were usually reported in the United States every year.

In other parts of the world, mumps is common. In the UK, thousands get mumps every year and most of the people that get sick are college-aged.

The CDC does not have proof that this outbreak is related to a strain from the UK, but U.S. outbreaks have historically coincided with outbreaks there.

Iowa doesn't want to take the chance that infected college students will bring the mumps virus home once summer holidays begin. The Iowa Department of Public Health has begun a large-scale immunization of 18 to 22 year olds in college communities.

Even if people receive both doses of the MMR vaccine, health agencies suggest some general health practices such as covering one's mouth when coughing and sneezing, washing hands often, no sharing of drinks and cigarettes, and staying home if feeling sick.

-- Compiled by Adnaan Wasey for NewsHour Extra

© 2006 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions