

District prepared to respond to health concerns

State Department of Health requests that districts disseminate information on Ebola outbreak in West Africa



The fall and winter months often mean more cold symptoms, influenza and occasional fevers. This season is no different, but recent media reports about communicable diseases in New York City and Dallas, Texas, have prompted the Warrensburg Central School District to both review its procedures for preventing the spread of illnesses (such as the flu and colds) and also to respond to requests from the New York State Department of Health (DOH) and the New York State Education Department (SED) to distribute information about Ebola.

“Exceedingly small” likelihood of Ebola occurring in schools

To date, only four people in the United States have tested positive for Ebola in the last six months out of the thousands who have traveled to Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, where the outbreak began. The DOH is monitoring the case of a physician in New York City who traveled to the area on a humanitarian trip. According to the DOH and SED, however, “The likelihood of a student with symptoms of Ebola presenting in a school in New York is exceedingly small.” In an abundance of caution, though, districts across the state are being proactive and sharing tips on how to help prevent the spread of illnesses, as well as facts about Ebola.

Facts about Ebola

Ebola is a rare disease found mostly in African countries. The first Ebola species was identified in 1976, and the disease has occurred sporadically in Africa since that time. Here are other facts you should note about the disease:

- Ebola is **ONLY** spread through direct contact with the blood or bodily fluids of a person who is sick and is exhibiting symptoms or through touching such contaminated objects as needles and syringes.
- Ebola does **NOT** spread through casual contact.
- Ebola is **NOT** spread through the air and doesn’t appear to stick to surfaces.
- Ebola is **NOT** spread through water or through food grown or legally purchased in the United States.
- Ebola patients cannot infect other people before they show signs of the illness.
- Health care workers and family/friends of an infected person are at highest risk of being exposed to the Ebola virus.
- Symptoms can appear between two and 21 days after exposure.

Many Ebola symptoms similar to those of other illnesses

The symptoms of Ebola include fever (greater than 101.5°F or 38.6°C), severe headache, muscle pain, weakness, diarrhea, vomiting, abdominal pain and unexplained bleeding or bruising. Since many of these symptoms are similar to those for colds and the flu, it's important to keep in mind that the chances of getting Ebola are extremely low (unless a person has traveled to an affected area), while also acting to prevent more common illnesses. The Warrensburg Central School District also released Flu Facts for Parents, which outlines flu symptoms and prevention tips. Recommendations for preventing the spread of the Ebola virus are much like those for preventing the spread of the flu. For example, parents are always asked to keep children home if they have a fever, vomiting or diarrhea. Other tips are as follows:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use hand sanitizers.
- Cover your cough. Use a tissue to cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing; throw the tissue away after using it.
- Avoid close contact with people who have colds or the flu.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth (germs spread this way).
- Clean and disinfect commonly touched surfaces, such as doorknobs, faucet handles and toys.

The district is staying informed through continued contact with local and state health agencies. These agencies have provided some recommendations to school health offices, such as reviewing infection control practices, maintaining proper procedures when interacting with ill students and ensuring adequate supplies of personal protective equipment (e.g., gloves). It is expected that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and state and local health agencies will issue additional guidance specific to school districts if necessary.

Additional resources

Facts about Ebola in the United States: <http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/pdf/infographic.pdf>

Difference between infections spread through air vs. those spread by droplets:

<http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/pdf/infections-spread-by-air-or-droplets.pdf>

The New York State Department of Health: <http://www.health.ny.gov/diseases/communicable/ebola/>

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/index.html>

Statewide School Health Services Center: <http://www.schoolhealthservicesny.com/>

The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene:

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/diseases/ebola.shtml>

Ebola and the evaluation of a returned traveler: <http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/pdf/ebola-algorithm.pdf>