

Meningitis suspected cause of death for local child

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By TOM VOGT, Columbian staff writer

Meningitis is suspected in the death Tuesday of a young child, Clark County health officials said.

The victim was described as a very young preschool child who lived in Clark County. Health officials declined to specify the age, sex and neighborhood of the child.

Marni Storey, public health services manager for the Clark County Health Department, said the child's family "did the best it could" when the child became sick.

The first symptom of meningitis, a fever, developed Saturday.

"Anyone with a child knows how common fever is," Storey said.

When a purple rash a tell-tale symptom of meningitis developed early Tuesday morning, the child was taken to a hospital emergency department, Storey said.

It is considered Clark County's first death from meningococcal meningitis since one person died in 2002. There were a total of six meningitis deaths in Clark County from 2000 through 2002.

The child was not in school or in day care or any other public group of children, Storey said.

Seven family members have received preventive medication, Storey said. There are 34 other close personal contacts, including people who attended a birthday party with the child, on a list for treatment. Close contact means a person who might have kissed or shared food or drink with someone with meningitis, Storey said.

At this time, there is no indication that the death is related to a recent meningitis outbreak in Oregon that killed a McMinnville teenager, Storey said.

The disease "is not unusual, especially this time of year," she said.

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid around the spinal cord or the brain. According to the state Department of Health, the bacteria that causes meningitis is carried in the nose and throat of many healthy people.

The bacteria can be spread to others through nasal or throat secretions. Although most people exposed to the meningococcal bacteria do not become ill, others can develop fever and other symptoms.

Storey advised parents that if their child has a fever above 101 degrees, "It is a good idea to check with a health care provider."

Other symptoms include nausea, vomiting and a red-to-purple rash that can range from a pinpoint pattern to a blotch that resembles a rug burn.

If confirmed, this will be Clark County's second meningitis case of 2006. A young man, whose age was not revealed, was hospitalized on Jan. 13. He is recovering, Storey said, and all his personal contacts received medical treatment.

Clark County had six meningitis cases in 2005; three in 2004; five in 2003; 11 in 2002 (with one death); 10 in 2001 (with two deaths); and eight in 2000 (with three deaths.)

Since 1980, Washington has had 1,994 cases of meningococcal disease, with 144 deaths.

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Meningitis at a glance

WHAT: Infection of the fluid around the spinal cord or brain.

SYMPTOMS (2 and older): Sudden onset of high fever, vomiting, headache, stiff neck, nausea and pinpoint red rash or purple spots.

INFANT SYMPTOMS: Can include high-pitched crying, irritability, listlessness, vomiting, seizures and reluctance to eat.

HOW IT IS SPREAD: Through the exchange of nasal and throat secretions.

HOW SERIOUS: Even with treatment, up to 10 percent of serious cases are fatal.