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News

Chicken pox

outbreak

By Matt Clower, The Messenger

Troy Elementary School nurse Sarah Black should probably go ahead and get a revolving door for her office. It would help with all the traffic coming in and out these days.

TES is in the midst of the worst outbreak of chicken pox the school has faced in eight years - an outbreak made more surprising because most all the affected students have previously received chicken pox vaccinations.

Black said she could hardly believe it when the first students started showing up in her office with the characteristic red, itchy spots.

"I was in denial at first, I said this can't possibly be chicken pox," Black said.

Oh, but was it ever chicken pox, and it has spread like wildfire. Since the first student was diagnosed in late January, over 40 students in every grade have come down with it.

In recent years, the numbers of chicken pox cases at TES had been dramatically reduced by the chicken pox vaccination which is now required for all incoming students. In eight years, Black said she had seen only one student with a case.

This recent outbreak appears to be a new mutation of the virus, Black said, and the Alabama Department of Public Health is calling it a second generation breakthrough.

ADPH official Peggy Searcy said the department is not officially committing on the situation at this time, but she did confirm that the ADPH is aware of the situation at TES and is monitoring it. She also said the ADPH was not making any recommendations regarding a booster shot for the vaccination at this time. Searcy said TES was the only school in the eight counties of the area ten region to report

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cases of chicken pox.

TES teacher Gloria Blackmon's son Hunter is thought to be the first case in the outbreak. She said even the doctors office was hesitant at first to believe Hunter could have chicken pox after he'd received the vaccination.

"I called and the nurse said 'Oh, he doesn't have chicken pox'," Blackmon said. "But as soon as I brought him in, they said to take him out of school."

Chicken pox is highly contagious, and actually starts becoming contagious two weeks before the first pox appear, Black said. Infected children remain contagious until all of the pox have dried up and scabbed over.

Until then, Black said it is imperative for parents to keep those children out of school to avoid spreading the virus.

Black said most of the infected students are experiencing only a mild case of chicken pox, with just a few visible spots and few students reporting a fever.

Although one more student was diagnose with chicken pox on Friday, Black said the disease does appear to be tapering off and she hopes the impending Spring Break holiday will give the outbreak a chance to run its course without spreading to more students.

Other local school systems confirmed they have not yet experienced an outbreak of chicken pox.

Dwight Ward, Pike Liberal Arts headmaster, said he was not aware of any cases of chicken pox and reported the school was experiencing normal levels of fu and other seasonal sickness.

Ward said because of the school's smaller size, in the past outbreaks of sickness have spread quickly and resulted in large numbers of absences. But he said that has not happened so far this year.

Pike County Elementary School has also been free of chicken pox so far, but is battling traditional seasonal outbreaks of flu and stomach virus, said nurse Betty Vance.

Vance said stomach viruses are unpredictable and difficult to prevent, but she said flu, and even chicken pox to an extent, can be avoided by good hand washing.

"Good hand washing is the most important thing as far as preventing sickness. Kids come to school and pick things up off of door handles or from each other. A lot of that ca be prevented by regular hand washing," Vance said. "And not just at school but at home too, A lot of people think that germs wont be as bad at home but they are."

Black encouraged adults to be cautious when around a child affected with chicken pox. The same virus that

causes chicken pox in a child can cause shingles in an adult.

Black also reminded parents not to use aspirin to treat children infected with chicken pox, as it can lead to a potentially fatal complication.



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