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## Press Release

COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE

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### **Cluster of chickenpox cases reported in Kenai/Soldotna area**

*State health officials recommend confirming, updating vaccinations for children and adults*

ANCHORAGE — Three related cases of chickenpox (varicella) in unvaccinated young adults have been reported in the Kenai/Soldotna area since mid-February and state health officials believe there is potential for wider community exposure, putting people who have not previously had chickenpox or received the chickenpox vaccine at risk for infection.

Chickenpox is a highly contagious illness that spreads from person to person by direct contact or through the air by coughing or sneezing. In otherwise healthy children, it usually only causes an uncomfortable rash, but it can occasionally lead to serious consequences including pneumonia, encephalitis and death. Infants, adolescents, adults, pregnant women, and people with weak immune systems are at increased risk for developing more severe symptoms. Also, anyone who acquires chickenpox is at risk for developing shingles later in life. A person with chickenpox is contagious one to two days before the rash appears and until all blisters have formed scabs. It takes 10 to 21 days after contact with an infected person to develop chickenpox. An average of 60 cases per year in Alaska have been reported over the past five years.

“Alaskans who are not currently immune to chickenpox should get vaccinated as soon as possible to protect their health and the health of their community,” said Dr. Joe McLaughlin, state epidemiologist.

Pediatric vaccine is available at many clinics and at the Kenai Public Health Center (630 Barnacle Way; 335-3400). Adolescent and adult vaccines are available at the following local retail pharmacies and clinics:

- Kenai MediCenter, 283-9118
- Fred Meyer Pharmacy, Soldotna, 260-2233
- Peninsula Community Health Services – Cottonwood, 262-3119
- Safeway Pharmacy, Kenai, 283-6300 and Soldotna, 714-5400
- Peninsula Medical Center, 262-4161
- South Central Family Practice, 260-7784
- Soldotna Professional Pharmacy, 262-3800

People with chickenpox should stay away from schools and other public gathering places until their blisters have formed scabs. Ideally, it is better to call your health care provider to seek advice than to go into the clinic or emergency room.

Women should not get the chickenpox vaccine during pregnancy. If pregnant women or people with a severely compromised immune system are exposed to chickenpox, they should contact their health care provider.

The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services is monitoring the situation and will update the public as needed. For more information about varicella, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/chickenpox/index.html>.

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