VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH STRESSES TIPS FOR A HEALTHY HOLIDAY SEASON

(Richmond, Va.) As schools let out for the winter break and families visit loved ones near and far, children may be spreading more than just holiday cheer. An increase in reports of influenza and norovirus in schools underscores the importance of preventing the spread of illness this holiday season. Additionally, it's not too late to get vaccinated against the flu. The circulating strains of flu are a good match to those included in this year's vaccine.

"Over the past three weeks, the number of flu outbreaks reported each week increased from two to 28, and norovirus outbreaks went from three to 11," said Acting State Health Commissioner Maureen E. Dempsey, MD, FAAP. The majority of those were in school settings. "With so much illness circulating it's important that we all do our part to help prevent the spread of disease and to protect those who are most vulnerable to serious complications."

While anyone can get sick from influenza or norovirus, certain people, particularly those with other health conditions or who are in frail health, are more vulnerable to complications that can lead to hospitalization or even death.

VDH urges everyone to take the following precautions to prevent the spread of illness:

- Stay home when sick. Stay home if you or your child has a fever. You should be fever-free, without the use of fever reducing medicines (like Tylenol), before you return to school or work.

- Cover your cough.

- Wash your hands often and thoroughly.

- If you are sick, do not visit loved ones in the hospital, nursing home, or any other facility housing those in frail health.

- If you go to a doctor for a respiratory illness, be sure to cover your cough and wash your hands. You can use a tissue to cover your cough and then dispose of it in a trashcan and wash your hands – each time. You might be asked to wait in a separate area and/or to wear a mask in the waiting room.

"No one likes getting sick, but for those people at higher risk for complications it can be very serious and even life-threatening," said Dr. Dempsey. "By staying home when your are sick, keeping sick children home, covering your cough and washing your hands frequently you are helping other people stay well and out of the hospital during the holidays."

For more tips on having a safe and healthy holiday season, visit www.vdh.virginia.gov

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