

Date: January 4, 2007

To: Health Care Providers and Public Health Professional

From: Alfred DeMaria, Jr., M.D., Chief Medical Officer, State Epidemiologist

Re: Winter Respiratory Illness

Despite the unusually mild temperatures, winter is upon us and with that comes an increased number of respiratory infections in both children and adults. Most are fairly mild, self-limiting and confined to the upper respiratory tract. In some instances, however, and especially in infants and children, upper respiratory infections may cause more severe disease. Bacteria and viruses can cause both upper and lower respiratory infections but most respiratory infections are probably viral. The most common causes of these infections are rhinovirus (which causes the common cold), adenovirus, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), influenza, and mycoplasma.

Since most of these infections are mild, they do not always reach medical attention. They are very common and, unless part of an outbreak or cluster, are not reportable. Testing for these infections is not always available or accurate.

Since these infections typically present with similar symptoms, it can frequently appear that clusters and outbreaks of illness are occurring, especially in closed settings such as schools and long-term care facilities, when multiple agents may be involved.

At this time, there is no indication that Massachusetts is experiencing an increase in respiratory infections outside of what would normally be expected, although influenza activity is increasing and is expected to peak in several weeks.

The spread of most respiratory illnesses can be controlled through the use of good infection control practices including proper hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene. Handwashing information and materials for the general public, healthcare providers and foodhandlers as well as a cough etiquette video can be found at <http://www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/handwashing/hw.htm>. Detailed information for healthcare providers about controlling the spread of respiratory illnesses can be found at http://www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/sars/sars_booklet.pdf.