Cause of respiratory illness cluster in southeast Alabama determined

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The Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) and the Houston County Health Department have determined that the cause of a respiratory illness cluster in southeast Alabama was a combination of influenza A, rhinovirus, the virus associated with the common cold, and bacterial pneumonia.

"This is good news. Testing has ruled out avian flu and novel coronavirus," said State Health Officer Dr. Don Williamson.

Earlier this month, seven patients were admitted to the hospital with fever, cough and shortness of breath with no known cause for their illness. Public health officials began an epidemiological investigation to interview the families of the patients about travel and exposure. Specimens were requested and submitted to the ADPH Bureau of Clinical Laboratories in Montgomery. Of the seven patients whose specimens were submitted, six were found to be positive for either influenza A, rhinovirus or a combination of the two, and three patients were found to have bacterial pneumonia. Two of the seven patients eventually died.

Dr. Mary McIntyre, assistant state health officer for disease control and prevention, said, "While enhanced surveillance associated with this cluster is no longer necessary, health care providers are encouraged to continue routine year-round influenza surveillance activities and submit specimens to the state laboratory for testing."

Health care providers should always use standard precautions when dealing with patients with respiratory illness.

If you or your family members have respiratory symptoms of fever, cough and shortness of breath, please contact your health care provider to be evaluated. In addition, everyone should take steps to prevent transmission of disease and are reminded to follow these precautions:

• Cover your cough or sneeze with a sleeve or tissue.

• Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are also effective.
• Avoid touching your mouth, eyes and nose with your hands. Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
• If you get sick, stay home and limit contact with others to avoid infecting them.

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