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VARICELLA CASES IN COLUMBIA COUNTY SCHOOL

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A cluster of varicella, commonly called chickenpox, has been identified by the Florida Department of Health in Columbia County (DOH-Columbia) at a local school where six students have been diagnosed with the vaccine-preventable disease, as of Jan. 29. An additional child not currently enrolled in the school system has also been diagnosed, bringing the county total to seven cases.

Per state statutes, the location of the school and identifying information about the students are not shared. Parents at the school in question have been notified in writing.

Varicella is an acute infectious disease caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV). One of its forms is herpes zoster, or shingles; in children, primary varicella infection is called chickenpox. It is spread person-to-person or through contact with the fluid in the lesions on the person's skin.

There were 6 varicella cases in Columbia County and 743 in Florida during 2015. During 2014 Columbia County had no reported cases of chickenpox, and 5 reported cases in 2013.

A rash is sometimes the first sign of the virus in children. Those who are unvaccinated will have crusty lesions on the head, trunk and extremities in addition to fever and other complications. In children with cancer or HIV who already have immune-compromised systems, symptoms are more serious. Other complications may include infected lesions, pneumonia or even death.

The varicella vaccine is administered to children as the combination MMRV (measles, mumps, rubella, varicella) vaccine or as two doses.

DOH-Columbia continues to investigate the cluster and recommends that parents fully vaccinate infants and children at their healthcare provider's office or at a health department location. For vaccination information you may call DOH-Columbia at (386) 758-1068, or visit the main clinic at 217 NE Franklin Street, Lake City, FL 32055. Hours of operation are Monday-Friday from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, no appointments are necessary.

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