



NEWS RELEASE

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Proper handwashing urged to help prevent shigellosis

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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In an attempt to help prevent the spread of shigellosis, the Tuscaloosa Health Department urges residents of Tuscaloosa County to wash their hands more. Since the beginning of March, 43 cases of shigellosis have occurred in within the county. This represents 70 percent of the state's total number of cases for 2006.

Shigellosis is caused by the bacterium *Shigella*. It generally causes diarrhea and fever lasting four to seven days.

"Careful hand washing after using the toilet, after changing diapers, before preparing food and before eating can help prevent the spread of shigellosis" said Angie Dubose, nurse at Tuscaloosa Health Department.

The infection is spread when infectious fecal material contaminates food or water or otherwise gets into the mouth of another person, as through close personal contact. Shigellosis is extremely easy infection to contract.

"Even contamination on a person's hands that is invisible can contain enough bacteria to infect others," said Dr. Albert White, health officer, Public Health Area 3.

At this time, it is important that everyone increase the frequency and care of hand washing. Some persons who are infected may have no symptoms at all, but still pass the *Shigella* bacteria to others. In addition, those infected with *Shigella* often remain infectious for several weeks.

Individuals experiencing fever and diarrhea, bloody diarrhea, or diarrhea lasting more than 48 hours are encouraged to seek medical care. Antibiotics can be prescribed to treat shigellosis and also decrease the time an individual is infectious to others.

Tuscaloosa County residents should not be unduly alarmed. Shigellosis occurs in all areas of the United States throughout the year. Handwashing practices in most communities are less than perfect, allowing *Shigella* to spread once it is introduced.

Swimming season is here. Residents are urged not swim at public beaches if they have diarrhea. In addition, diapered children should not swim if they have had diarrhea in the previous two weeks. Properly chlorinated water kills *Shigella* very quickly unless it is contaminated with a large amount of feces, as from a diaper.

So far this year, 55 cases of shigellosis have been reported throughout the state. The 43 cases in Tuscaloosa County represent a marked increase as only 13 cases of shigellosis occurred in Tuscaloosa County in 2005. In 2004, there were only 4 cases.

Generally every year, one or more communities in Alabama experience outbreaks similar to what is happening in Tuscaloosa County. In 2005, there were 221 cases of shigellosis in Alabama. In 2004, there were 318 cases of shigellosis in Alabama.

The age range of the 43 cases in Tuscaloosa County is from 1 year to 74 years old. Half are less than 5 years old.

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