

## **Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency**

**April 25, 2016**

**Contact: Rebecca Burns, Health Officer**  
517-279-9561, ext. 0148#

**Kim Wilhelm, Prevention Services Director**  
517-279-9561, ext. 0143#

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

#### **Chickenpox Cases Continue...**

**Coldwater, MI** — New cases of chickenpox continue to be reported in St. Joseph County as of April 22nd. Officials from the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency are urging parents to have their children vaccinated against the Varicella (Chickenpox) Virus. According to Kim Wilhelm, Prevention Services Director for the tri-county Health Department, “We now have two additional cases of Chickenpox being reported. These children were sent home from school. In addition, we are excluding any child from a school reporting cases for 21 days, who has a waiver on file and cannot provide medical proof of Chickenpox; or until they receive the first of two shots.”

Under the waiver program, effective statewide in January 2015, parents/guardians meet with a health department representative to ask questions and discuss their concerns regarding immunizations and the risks associated with childhood diseases and prevention measures. Upon completion of the educational session, parent/guardians can request the waiver, knowing that as a disease control measure, children who lack medical documentation of immunity or otherwise are considered susceptible to a specific vaccine preventable disease may be excluded from school, if they are identified as being at risk.

While Chickenpox is considered a typical childhood illness, the disease is highly contagious. In addition, it poses significant risks for the following groups of people:

- Infants
- Adolescents
- Adults
- Pregnant women
- People with weakened immune systems because of illness or medications; for example:

- People with HIV/AIDS or cancer
- Patients who have had transplants, and
- People on chemotherapy, immunosuppressive medications, or long-term use of steroids.

Health officials say optimal protection in a community occurs when everyone who can be vaccinated, is vaccinated. “Vaccination is their first line of defense,” states Wilhelm.

The most notable symptom of chickenpox is the blister-like rash that itches. The rash may be preceded or accompanied by fever, tiredness, headache, and loss of appetite. Chickenpox is spread easily through coughing, sneezing, and other contact with respiratory secretions. Like other herpes-family viruses, this virus remains in the body indefinitely as a latent infection and can reactivate later in life. When the chickenpox virus reactivates it causes a painful condition called shingles, also known as zoster.

Chickenpox can be variable, ranging from mild with few ‘pox’ lesions to very severe illness requiring hospitalization. Complications such as pneumonia, bacterial infections, and meningitis are more likely in adolescent and adult age groups. Before the licensure and routine use of the vaccine, there were an estimated 4 million cases annually, with about 11,000 hospitalizations and an average of about 100 chickenpox-related deaths each year in the United States.

Children in need of vaccination can make an appointment at the health department. Walk-ins are welcome. The health department offers free immunizations to eligible children through its Vaccine for Children Program. Children under the age of 19 years, who are: covered by Medicaid Health Insurance, Native American, uninsured or who are insured but lack immunization coverage are eligible for the free shots. To learn more about chickenpox or the health department’s immunization programs, visit our website at: [www.bhsj.org](http://www.bhsj.org).

**Branch County**  
570 N. Marshall Rd.  
Coldwater, MI 49036  
(517) 279-9561, ext. 0100#

**Hillsdale County**  
20 Care Drive  
Hillsdale, MI 49242  
(517) 437-7395, ext. 0336#

**Three Rivers**  
1110 Hill St.  
Three Rivers, MI 49093  
(269) 273-2161, 0208#

###