

## **Medical Fact Sheet for Katrina**

**1. *What type of health problems might students exhibit following a hurricane such as Katrina?*** There are in fact many medical issues that arise in both the preparation and recovery of a hurricane. People need to be aware of the health risks of hurricanes to avoid illness just as you would prepare your house with plywood to avoid broken windows and damage to your belongings.

### **Musculoskeletal injuries, abrasions, contusions or lacerations-**

Commonly pre and immediately post-hurricane we see injuries from boarding up windows before to the debris left behind.

Cautioning children to be careful and wear shoes will help.

Immediate care and keeping wounds clean and protected with dry clean dressings to prevent infection. Cellulitis or wounds with redness, swelling or drainage should be referred immediately for therapy.

**Gastrointestinal illnesses-**In addition to injuries, students may be sickened by eating spoiled food and drinking contaminated water. Gastrointestinal illnesses are very common and may have fever, diarrhea, nausea or vomiting. Many of the water-borne illnesses such as dysentery, salmonella, giardia and cholera require antibiotics and need to be diagnosed early. Educators and parents need to be observant for loss of appetite or frequent trips to the restroom. They also need to encourage frequent hand washing, use of hand sanitizers and keep desks and toys clean to avoid spread from one student to the next.

**Lung Problems-**Natural disasters may also lead to air pollution. Lung infections may occur after inhalation of sea water. Disasters resulting in massive structural collapse can cause the release of chemical or biologic contaminants (e.g., asbestos or mold spores). Persons with asthma or chronic pulmonary disease may be more susceptible to adverse effects from these exposures.

## ***2. What type of health risks might appear in schools following a hurricane?***

**Wild or displaced animals**-Children love animals but many of the risks we fail to consider are associated with wild or displaced animals. Rabies, rat bite fever, snake bite and other illnesses in animals are common. Teaching children to avoid all animals-wild or domestic and be aware of the possibility of displaced reptiles especially snakes in standing water or debris is important. The venom of a small or immature snake can be even more concentrated than that of larger ones; therefore, all snakes should be left alone. Fewer than half of all snakebite wounds actually contain venom, however, medical attention should be immediately sought any time a bite wound breaks the skin.

**Insects**-Living with out air-conditioning or adequate shelter may expose students to mosquitoes-and mosquito borne illnesses, stinging insects, and red ants-increasing the risk of allergic reactions and skin infections. Because of standing water in these areas, mosquito breeding can become a problem. The first mosquitoes to appear and the majority will be a nuisance and likely not transmit disease. The potential exists for outbreaks of West Nile, St. Louis Encephalitis, and dengue. Prevention of mosquito bites is recommended through combined use of insect repellent containing DEET or picardin and wearing long sleeved shirts and long pants when outdoors. Anyone exhibiting symptoms such as fever, headache and a stiff neck should be taken to a hospital right away.

**Carbon Monoxide Poisoning** The most common symptoms of CO poisoning are headache, dizziness, weakness, nausea, vomiting, chest pain, and confusion. Fresh air is the therapy but students who are constantly exposed at home may present with this in the mornings or a morning headache. Many people with CO poisoning mistake their symptoms for the flu or are misdiagnosed by physicians, which sometimes results in tragic deaths.

**Temperature-Related Illness**-Children are especially at risk for Temperature-Related Illness such as heat exhaustion & heat stroke.

**Mold Exposure**-After hurricanes, excess moisture and standing water contribute to the growth of mold in homes and other buildings. When returning to a home that has been flooded, be aware that mold may be present and may be a health risk for your family. People at Greatest Risk from Mold are people with asthma, allergies, or other breathing conditions. People who are sensitive to mold may experience stuffy nose, irritated eyes, wheezing, or skin irritation. People allergic to mold may have difficulty in breathing and shortness of breath. People with weakened immune systems and with chronic lung diseases, such as obstructive lung disease, may develop mold infections in their lungs.

**Stress**-Although the destruction has been widespread, it has not been homogeneous. Some are dealing with a few inches of water in their homes, whereas others will be coping with houses that have been completely destroyed. Almost all are dealing with a loss of electricity and questionable access to potable drinking water. But all have been affected so keeping in mind that different children react differently, we need to be looking for somatic or physical symptoms of PTSD or stress. Irritability, aggression, anxiety, racing heartbeats, confusion, difficulty concentrating, fatigue, stomach problems, shortness of breath, chest pain, headaches and body aches can all be physical symptoms of PTSD or acute stress.

### ***3. What can teachers, counselors, school nurses and administrators do to help minimize health problems?***

\* The days and weeks after an emergency are going to be rough-even for educators. Take care of yourself. Some sleeplessness, anxiety, anger, hyperactivity, mild depression, or lethargy are normal, and may go away with time. If you feel any of these symptoms acutely, seek counseling. Your state and local health departments will help you find local resources, including hospitals or health care providers that you may need.

\* Seek medical care if you or your students are injured, feel sick, or have acute stress and anxiety.

\* Keep as many elements of students' normal routine incorporated into the disaster plans as possible, including activities to allay children's fears.

\* Prevent heat-related illness: Stay in air-conditioned buildings. Take breaks in shaded areas or in cool rooms. Drink water and nonalcoholic fluids often. Wear lightweight, light-colored, loose-fitting clothing. Do outdoor activities during cooler hours. Also burns from hot metal or the sun should be avoided.

\* Be aware that you may have fewer resources to attend to Day-to-day conflicts, so it is best to resolve what you can ahead of time.

\* Let your children know that it is okay to feel upset when something bad or scary happens. Encourage your child to express feelings and thoughts, without making judgments.

#### ***4. What can administrators, teachers, counselors and school nurses do for medically challenged students following a hurricane?***

Be aware that many of the children may have missed medications for diabetes or asthma or have had limited access to health care. Making sure you watch for signs and symptoms of worsening or new illness to avoid worsening of the underlying conditions.