



December 17, 2009

Dear Parent or Guardian:

In the last two weeks, the Pennsylvania Department of Health (PADOH) has received reports of cases of *Shigella* infection circulating among children and adults in the Reading area of Berks Co. More specifically, there have been 4 recent cases identified among students in the Reading school district.

Shigellosis is an infection that produces diarrheal illness. It is caused by *Shigella* bacteria. This illness spreads very easily, especially among young children. People may experience mild or severe diarrhea, often with fever, vomiting, abdominal pain, and traces of blood or mucous in the stool. Some people may not show any symptoms of disease when infected but can still spread it to other people. The symptoms usually develop one to three days after becoming infected but can take as long as seven days to appear. Shigellosis can be spread for as long as the bacteria is present in a person's stool. Most people pass *Shigella* bacteria in their stool for one or two weeks, even if the diarrhea has stopped. Young children, if untreated, can pass the bacteria for even longer. Suitable antibiotics may shorten the length of time the bacteria can be spread. The bacteria are spread by eating or drinking contaminated food or water, or by contact with fecal material (stool) from an infected person. Because even small amounts of *Shigella* bacteria can cause illness, the bacteria can spread to others if infected people do not thoroughly wash their hands after using the toilet, before preparing or eating food, or if they don't carefully handle soiled items like diapers. **Young children should be instructed to wash their hands after using the toilet and supervised while doing so.**

It is very important that children who are exhibiting symptoms, particularly diarrhea, be kept at home. Older, school-age children may return to school once symptoms have gone away. Children with *Shigella* who attend child care must have two negative stool cultures, obtained at least 48 hours after the last dose of antibiotic and at least 24 hours apart, before they can return to child care facilities. The same restrictions apply to persons with *Shigella* who are healthcare workers or employed as food handlers.

If you need further information please contact the PADOH Southeast District Office at 610-378-4352 or 877-PA-HEALTH.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephen M. Ostroff", written over a light blue horizontal line.

Stephen M. Ostroff, MD
Director, Bureau of Epidemiology