



Public Health 101

Routine monitoring of important diseases by public health departments is called disease surveillance. Each state decides which diseases are to be under surveillance in that state. The county reports these diseases to the state health department, which reports them to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In addition to tracking the number of cases of reportable infections, counties also collect information about disease outbreaks, and report a summary of that information to the state. In 2007, local health departments in Oregon investigated 231 outbreaks.

Why do public health officials investigate outbreaks?

A disease outbreak is an indication that something needs to be improved in our food safety system, water systems, or hygiene practices. Public health departments investigate outbreaks to control them, and to learn how outbreaks can be prevented in the future.

How are outbreaks detected?

The initial clue that an outbreak is occurring can come in various ways. It may be when a person realizes that several other people who were together at an event have become ill and he or she calls the local health department. It may be when a physician realizes she has seen more than the usual number of patients with the same illness. It may be when a county health department gets an unusually large number of reports of illness. Often calls from concerned citizens are how outbreaks are first detected.

If a public health official contacts you to find out about an illness that you may have had, your cooperation is important. In public health investigations, it can be as important to talk with healthy people as it is to talk with those who may have become ill. If you suspect a disease outbreak, call the Douglas County disease reporting line at 541-440-3571.