

Houston Health

Summer 2001
Houston Department of
Health and Human Services



A Quarterly Newsletter for Advisory Councils of the Houston Department of Health and Human Services

HDHHS steps into action to aid community after flooding disaster

Immediately after the floodwaters of Tropical Storm Allison delivered Houston one of the worst disasters in the city's history, the staff of the Houston Department of Health and Human Services made their way into the community and provided emergency services.

The department mobilized nursing staff from its health centers and immunization bureau and set up 29 temporary sites in hard-hit areas of the city to provide tetanus shots to people severely affected by the floodwaters.

Staff vaccinated more than 10,300 people seven years of age and older with puncture wounds or cuts that were exposed to floodwaters. These individuals were the most at risk for developing tetanus. Staff vaccinated them if they had not been immunized in the last five years.

Inspectors with the Bureau of Consumer Health first sprinted to the many shelters to certify that their food services were safe for people flooded out of their homes. They then hurried into Houston's grocery stores and grocery distribution centers and in two days were able to conduct approximately 400 inspections. The inspectors condemned a total of 1.4 million pounds of food contaminated by floodwater.



Arnold Anderson with the Bureau of Occupational Health and Radiation Control talks about exposure to mold and proper cleanup to a resident whose home flooded.

The Bureau of Occupational Health and Radiation Control transformed itself into a call-in center that residents and businesses could telephone for guidance on resolving indoor air quality problems. Seven employees worked almost entirely on flood-related issues during the two weeks following the disaster.

The Bureau of Epidemiology intensified surveillance efforts and kept a close watch on the community and local hospitals for signs of disease resulting from the storm.

The Bureau of Laboratory Services is still busy testing private water wells

suspected of being contaminated during the flooding. The bureau thus far has tested approximately 1,500 water samples taken mostly from wells in the northern parts of Harris County. The bureau's initial testing determined that about half of the private wells tested were contaminated.

Despite sustaining heavy flood damage like other Texas Medical Center institutions, the Medical Center lab was able to remain in operation. The lab, which serves as a regional laboratory and

is an integral facility because area health care providers depend on its testing services, only briefly scaled down services.

Sixty department employees volunteered on Saturday, June 16, and helped to conduct a post-flood risk and disease assessment of several severely affected neighborhoods.

The Houston/Harris County Area Agency on Aging distributed to the community 6,000 shelf-stable meals, 100 electric fans and 150 linen sets.

The Sunnyside Multi-Service Center served as a Red Cross disaster relief site.

Summer Safety
Guide



**Staying safe
around the
pool...Page 5**



**Keeping heat-related
illnesses at bay
...Page 6**



(Photos from top left) Two Red Cross volunteers review applications for aid at the Sunnyside Multi-Service Center, which served as a disaster relief site. A nurse at the Sunnyside Health Center administers a tetanus shot to a resident exposed to floodwaters left by heavy rains from Tropical Storm Allison. The Gulf Coast Community Center secured donated clothing for residents who suffered property losses and used the Kashmere Multi-Service Center as a distribution point. The staff at the Kashmere Multi-Service Center and the Mayor's Citizens' Assistance Office organized a food bank for area residents.



(Photos from top) The Bureau of Consumer Health condemned 1.4 million pounds of food as a result of flooding at many Houston businesses including this convenience store. HDHHS' staff members sort stacks of files damaged by the water that flooded the department's Medical Center lab. Hundreds of residents sought aid at the Sunnyside Multi-Service Center, which served as one of the Red Cross disaster relief sites. An employee at a local business throws away food contaminated by the floodwaters.



Mobile unit carries Peña, HIV prevention message

Visiting Houston's hot spots does not mean going to the city's top attractions for Jose Peña.

Hot spots are the places Peña frequents during his workweek to help stop the spread of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Sites that better reflect his definition of a hot spot range from street corners busy with drug activity and prostitution to an apartment building that data pinpoints as a location containing the homes of various people with a sexually transmitted disease.

As a senior health educator, Peña spends four workdays – sometimes nights – a week crisscrossing the city looking for a hot spot where he and his co-workers in the Bureau of HIV/STD can park the Department of Health and Human Services' HIV mobile unit. Peña and the co-workers who staff the mobile unit represent the department's effort to curb the spread of the deadly disease in as many fronts as possible and with as many prevention strategies as possible.

A customized 40-foot truck, the mobile unit enables the department to take its education, counseling and testing services directly to the community, especially high-risk or hard-to-reach populations. Staff members are able to provide confidential testing for HIV, syphilis and chlamydia.

"At first people just come to us to get free condoms, but it does not take them long to realize we are in their neighborhood to help," Peña said. "Once they decide to come inside the mobile unit, we can take them to one of our three counseling rooms, go over the behaviors that put them at risk for HIV infection and test them."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 800,000 to 900,000 Americans are infected with HIV. In Houston, Mayor Lee P.



Brown declared a state of emergency in the African-American community in 1999 when its rate of HIV infection reached a crisis level. That year, 61 percent of the newly reported HIV infections in Houston were in the African-American population. The latest epidemiological reports reveal the African-American population accounts for 57 percent of the new HIV infections. AIDS cases in Houston and Harris County reported to the department since 1981 now total 18,740.

Peña's top priority is education. He works hard to get the HIV prevention message to all those he encounters, especially to mothers. He said mothers are exceptionally protective, focused on keeping the family together and will do anything to ward off harm. Basically, he converts mothers into educators.

Education is also the aspect of his

job he enjoys most.

"You sit and chat with people," he said. "It is education even though you are just having a conversation.

"You can educate a person in a relatively short period of time and that makes my day. I can say to myself, 'Today was a good day. I helped someone change a high-risk behavior. I made someone start thinking about being safer.'"

The fact that AIDS has had an impact on his family plays a role every day in his dedication to spreading the prevention message. It definitely resulted in his decision to do community outreach. One of his uncles became infected with HIV, was treated harshly by the family and eventually developed AIDS and died.

"I knew there had to be something better so my goal became to try to help families understand HIV," he said.

Precautions prevent drownings, pool injuries

Many Houston children welcome summer vacations by heading off to the closest swimming pool. The Houston Department of Health and Human Services reminds parents that constant supervision is the most important key to preventing childhood drownings and other swimming pool injuries.

In Harris County, drowning was the second leading cause of fatal unintentional injury in children during 1998 and 1999, according to a recent report by the Houston/Harris County Child Fatality Review Team. The report also found that failure to provide adequate supervision contributed to 66 percent of the drownings.

While supervising children playing in pools, it is recommended parents cease other distracting activities such as reading, mowing a lawn, working on vehicles or even talking on the phone. Children can drown without making any noise.

Other safety precautions to keep in mind while children play in swimming pools include:

- Never run or play fight around wet pool surfaces.
- Keep toys and pets away from the pool as these may tempt children to lean into the pool or cause them to trip and fall.
- To prevent choking, never chew gum or eat while swimming, diving or playing in water.
- Enroll children aged 4 years or older in swimming lessons taught by qualified instructors. Swimming classes are not recommended for children under 4 years and do not necessarily make a child "drown-proof."
- Insist that children never swim alone or in unsupervised places. Parents should teach children to always swim with a buddy.
- Install a pool fence with vertical bars no more than four inches apart and a gate that closes and latches



automatically. Avoid leaving chairs or other furniture next to the fence as a child could use them to climb over and enter the pool.

- Learn CPR, cardiopulmonary resuscitation. This applies to parents and pool owners.

Diving accidents could leave someone a quadriplegic or cause children to hit their heads on a shallow bottom. It is recommended children enter pools feet first or hands forward to guide themselves toward the surface and avoid hitting the bottom or sides of the pool.

Children must never dive into inflatable or above ground pools; they are too shallow and not designed for diving. The American Red Cross recommends nine feet as minimum depth for diving or jumping.

It is important to empty inflatable and smaller plastic pools popular with younger children immediately after use. An infant or toddler can drown in as little as one inch of water. Parents must deflate or turn them over to prevent rain from accumulating in them.

Buckets used for household chores and bathtubs should always be emptied after use.

Houston Health Newsletter

is published quarterly by the



Houston Department of Health and Human Services
8000 N. Stadium Dr., Houston, Texas 77054

M. desVignes-Kendrick, MD, MPH, Director

Kathy Barton, Chief, Office of Public Affairs

Call 713-794-9021 to report news or offer suggestions for articles.

Porfirio Villarreal, Editor

Rita Rodriguez, Senior Community Liaison

HDHHS website:
www.ci.houston.tx.us/departme/health
City of Houston website:
www.cityofhouston.gov

Summer brings risk of heat-related illnesses

As summer temperatures rise so does the risk of heat-related illness, especially among the elderly.

The Houston Department of Health and Human Services recommends people take precautions against high heat and humidity to prevent illnesses such as heat exhaustion and heat stroke.

The human body normally cools itself through respiration and perspiration. High humidity interferes with this cooling process. High body temperatures can lead to damage to the brain or other vital organs and even death.

Thirty-eight heat-related deaths were reported in Harris County last summer. During the summers of 1998 and 1999, there were 23 and 20 heat deaths respectively.

Heat exhaustion, usually associated with strenuous activity, is the body's response to an excessive loss of water and salt contained in sweat. Signs include profuse sweating, paleness, muscle cramps, weakness, dizziness, headache, nausea or vomiting, a weak-but-rapid pulse and fainting. The skin may be cool and moist. If heat exhaustion is untreated, it may progress to heat stroke.

Heat stroke occurs when the body's temperature rises rapidly, the sweating system fails and the body is unable to cool down. Body temperature may rise to 106°F or higher within 10 to 15 minutes. Heat stroke can cause death or permanent disability if emergency treatment is not provided.

Heat stroke symptoms include an extremely high body temperature (above 103°F, orally), red, hot and dry skin (no sweating), rapid and strong pulse, throbbing headache, dizziness, nausea, confusion and unconsciousness.

The ability to respond to thermal stress, either heat or cold, is impaired

in the elderly. It takes the aged nearly twice the time of younger people to return to core body temperature (98.6°F) after exposure to extreme outdoor temperatures. It is recommended that the relatives, friends, or neighbors of the elderly take the initiative to visit the seniors and check on them for signs of heat exhaustion or heat stroke. This is especially important during excessive heat alerts.

Others who are particularly vulnerable include infants and children up to four years of age, those who are overweight and people with heart and respiratory problems.

Staying indoors, preferably in an air-conditioned home or building such as a library, shopping mall or multi-service center, is the best protection against the heat. Electric fans may provide comfort, but when the temperature is in the high 90s, fans without refrigerated air only spur the movement of hot humid air, which will accelerate body heating and raise internal body temperature. Taking a cool shower or bath or moving to an air-conditioned place is a much better way to cool off.

To avoid heat-related illness:

- Increase water consumption. Drink lots of liquids even before getting thirsty, but avoid those with caffeine, alcohol or large amounts of sugar because these can actually result in the loss of body fluid.
- Conduct outdoor work or exercise in the early morning or evening when it is cooler.



Outdoor workers should drink plenty of water or electrolyte-replacement beverages and take frequent breaks in the shade or in an air-conditioned facility. Those unaccustomed to working or exercising in a hot environment, need to start slowly and gradually acclimate to high temperatures.

- Wear light-colored, loose fitting clothing that permits the evaporation of perspiration.
- Stay out of direct sunlight; seek shade when available.
- A wide-brimmed hat helps prevent sunburn as well as heat-related illness. Sunscreen also protects from the sun's harmful rays and reduces the risk of sunburn. A sunburn reduces the body's ability to cool itself.
- If the house is not air-conditioned, seek accommodations in air-conditioned facilities during the heat of the day: malls, libraries, multi-service centers, etc.
- Take frequent cool baths or showers.
- Never leave a person or a pet inside a closed, parked car during hot weather.
- Stay alert to heat advisories issued by the National Weather Service.