

Contact: Sarah Isom, MPH, CHES
*Emergency Response Coordinator,
Public Information Officer*
isomsf@forsyth.cc | 336-703-3122

For Immediate Release: March 22, 2019

Petree Elementary Illness Investigation Update

March 22, 2019 | Winston-Salem, NC: After a thorough investigation, Forsyth County Department of Public Health has determined the sudden nausea and vomiting symptoms that occurred at Petree Elementary School were not caused by an infectious disease, a foodborne disease, or an airborne agent, as no evidence suggested or confirmed those causes. We have concluded there is no current threat to the public, or students, faculty, and staff at Petree Elementary School. A comprehensive review of our investigation is as follows:

On Wednesday, March 20th multiple students at Petree Elementary School started exhibiting illness symptoms in the form of nausea, vomiting, and stomachaches. Multiple city and county agencies responded to the scene and out of an abundance of caution, the building was evacuated.

Students that were showing the aforementioned symptoms were treated onsite by Emergency Medical Services (EMS), and evaluated by the on scene EMS Medical Director. All students treated onsite were released to their parents or guardians.

Forsyth County Department of Public Health responded to the incident and began our investigation to determine the cause of the sudden illness. Local and regional hazmat teams tested the building for radiation, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and mold hazards. These tests came back negative. Samples of both vomit and a red liquid stored in a student's plastic water bottle were taken to the State Public Health Laboratory (SPHL) for testing of any bioterrorism, chemical, or infectious agents present within the samples.

SLPH conducted the following tests:

- Ran the sampled liquid on a gas chromatography mass spectrometry (GC/MS). This test returned no conclusive results for containing bioterrorism, chemical, or infectious agents.
- Ran the sampled liquid on a Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR). This test returned no conclusive results for identifying bioterrorism, chemical, or infectious agents.
- Screened the liquid on a seven-element panel. This test screened for chemical elements arsenic, beryllium, barium, cadmium, lead, thallium, and uranium. None of these were present in the liquid sampled from the school.

CONTINUED: Petree Elementary Illness Investigation Update

Out of an abundance of caution Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools thoroughly decontaminated and sanitized Petree Elementary School overnight on Wednesday, March 20th, per their procedures.

On Thursday, March 21st, and Friday, March 22nd Forsyth County Department of Public Health officials conducted interviews with students and staff at Petree Elementary School. The interviews revealed that students that experienced nausea and/or vomiting were involved in one or both of the following activities:

- Ingesting a concentrated fruit-flavored liquid, commonly sold in stores in small squeeze bottles and usually added to at least 8 to 16 ounces of water.
- Ingesting large amounts of “hot” and “spicy” flavored chip products throughout both lunch and recess periods.

Public Health officials determined the concentrated fruit-flavored liquid was brought from home. The hot and spicy chip products were both purchased at the school and brought from student’s individual homes. Students ingesting the concentrated, undiluted liquid did so in a variety of ways, including from the palm of their hand, directly from their lunch trays using straws, food items, and/or their fingers, or from the bottle directly.

In conclusion, a combination of the following is determined to be the cause of the sudden vomiting and nausea experienced by a group of students at Petree Elementary School on Wednesday, March 20th, 2019:

- Students drinking an undiluted, fruit-flavored liquid concentrate not in accordance with package directions.
- Students consuming large amounts of acidic, hot and spicy flavored chip products, unaccompanied by other foods or beverages.
- Sympathetic vomiting and/or nausea caused by the sight/smell/sound of other students vomiting.
- A combination of poor hand hygiene and food and liquid-sharing across multiple students and classes.

End of Release