

Officials: H1N1 virus not going away

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Health department officials expect the H1N1 virus to continue showing up through 2010.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, some 22 million people have already contracted H1N1. Of course, exact numbers are difficult to come by since most people who get sick don't see a doctor and many others aren't tested for the virus strain.

There were also an estimated 98,000 hospitalizations from the virus in 2009, including 31 in Lee County. The county had five deaths as a result of patients contracting H1N1 out of 187 deaths statewide.

Jennifer James-Mesloh, spokesperson for the Lee County Health Department, said the number of county residents visiting the emergency room for flu-like symptoms peaked in the fall of 2009, yet that doesn't mean the virus itself is vanishing.

"What we are seeing out of the CDC is that, at this point, we don't know," said James-Mesloh when asked if the strain will begin dissipating this year. "Whether the peak of this H1N1 wave has been reached remains to be seen."

The seasonal cycle for the regular flu doesn't begin until February and the health department doesn't know whether people will begin showing signs of seasonal flu or H1N1 this spring.

"It remains to be seen whether people are coming down more with seasonal flu or H1N1," she said. "We are asking everyone to make sure they get vaccinated."

H1N1 first appeared in Lee County at the end of April 2009 when a student from Spring Creek Elementary was diagnosed. James-Mesloh said the CDC first declared that the H1N1 pandemic would last between 18 to 24 months and that if the estimate is correct, Lee County is still within that window.

"So if you start the clock from there, we are still within that 18 to 24-month window of heightened H1N1 activity," she said.

The health department is cautioning residents not feel like the virus has peaked and therefore not get the vaccine. Both seasonal flu and H1N1 vaccines are still being offered for free at the Lee County Health Department office on 83 Pondella Road.

The Fort Myers VA Clinic will be offering free seasonal flu and H1N1 vaccines and local pharmacies are also offering the vaccine for a nominal fee.

World Health Organization Director Margaret Chan released a statement on Dec. 29 pointing out that the H1N1 worldwide pandemic might not be over until 2011. The organization also estimated that the United States was one of a handful of countries that aren't likely to have a second wave of infections.

H1N1 has disproportionately affected younger Lee County residents. According to data from the Florida Department of Health, 40 percent of local deaths were in people between the age of 25-49

