

## Lee County man dies of swine flu

By MATT CLARK

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LEE COUNTY — A 51-year-old Lee County man died after becoming infected with H1N1, more commonly known as swine flu, Lee County Health Department officials reported Wednesday morning.

The death has led health department officials to renew a call for disease prevention techniques, as infections continue to show up during a time of year when the flu season is normally over. Plus, some researchers think the novel strain will gain strength during the next flu season, and affect 15 to 40 percent of the population.

The H1N1-related death was the first in Lee County and the 18th in Florida since the outbreak began in April, health department spokeswoman Jennifer James-Mesloh said. Nationwide, 263 people have died after becoming infected as of July 17, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"I think that this is definitely a sober reminder that influenza could have a tragic outcome, but I don't think it's a cause for panic," Mesloh said when asked how the public should react. "Normally, we do see influenza activity wane come summer time, and we did not see that this year. We have this heightened flu season."

In this case, "heightened" may mean more than zero cases, which is what is normal for this time of the year. Doctors are required by law to report the number of flu infections they see weekly. This time of year, they usually aren't reporting any cases.

As swine flu continues to spread, state epidemiologists have continued releasing weekly reports on flu infections, something they normally end when the regular flu season does. For the week ending July 11, 245 flu cases were reported by the state. Again, up from zero in a typical year. A week earlier, 259 cases were reported. A week before that? The reported cases were 361.

Nationally, the number of all flu-associated pediatric deaths reported by the CDC for the 2008-09 flu season have reached 90, already surpassing the number posted last season, when 88 flu-associated pediatric deaths were reported, and the 2007-08 season, when 78 deaths were reported.

Though Mesloh said the numbers are no cause for a major alarm as most H1N1 infections exhibit mild symptoms, she also noted that the health department is in the process of planning for a mass vaccination, should one be needed.

Mesloh said the first individuals to receive vaccinations under the plan would be pregnant women, children aged 6 months to 2 years, those who are in regular contact with infants, and individuals with conditions that weaken their ability to fight the flu.

“Those target groups, we would want to ask them to come forward,” Mesloh said. “Then, we would ask the general public to come in.”

In a July 2009 report released by the health department with its announcement, Massachusetts Institute of Technology distinguished bioenvironmental research scholar John M. Barry said “there are no certainties about influenza.”

“But the most likely scenario and also the consensus view at the moment is that novel H1N1 will surge in the next influenza season in the northern hemisphere,” Barry said. “Like the 1918 and 1957 pandemics, it will infect 15 to 40 percent of the population.”

As of July 11, 37 cases of H1N1 had been reported in Lee County, or less than about six one-thousands of one percent of the county’s population, state health department figures show. Mesloh said the number of Lee County cases is expected to grow to 46 by the end of this week.

Throughout the state, 2,188 cases had been reported by July 11, including 38 in Collier County, according to state figures. Nationally, 40,617 cases had been reported by July 17, according to the CDC.

Aside from a vaccine that targets all influenza infections, Barry suggested the most important resource for protection against H1N1 is communication, which is what the health department is doing in announcing the death.

“Getting and sustaining compliance — changing behavior and keeping it changed — requires winning public trust,” Barry said. “Gaining trust requires explaining in detail why each recommendation was made and why others were not.”

In this case, it is the death of a Lee County man which has lead health department officials to once again remind citizens of the importance good hygiene plays in preventing the spread of influenza. Staying home when feeling sick, washing hands frequently, and coughing into a sleeve or tissue are all being recommended by the health department.

“Our deepest sympathies are extended to family and friends,” health department director Judith Hartner said in a release announcing the death. “We have continued to see influenza

activity over the summer. Therefore, we urge people to take precautions against flu-illness by following proper hygiene.”



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