

July 22, 2009

Swine flu claims Lee County man

news-press.com is following this developing story and will have updates as information becomes available.

1:21 p.m. update

The Lee County man who died of swine flu adds to a nationwide tally of 263 people whose deaths have been attributed to the new strain of flu virus that emerged in late March. That count comes from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's July 17 update, the latest available.

The Lee County Health Department is not releasing any further information from the man's medical record, including his name, citing state and federal privacy laws. The department has said that the man did not report any chronic or pre-existing medical conditions.

In that, his death is somewhat unusual. Most people in the United States who died from the H1N1 virus, the scientific term for swine flu, had some sort of health complication that intensified the disease's toll. But that doesn't mean there weren't factors the man didn't report or that weren't released publicly. Obesity, for example, puts people at higher risk of flu deaths and complications. Or, some people don't respond well to antiviral drugs such as Tamiflu, which are the only real treatment for influenza. Again, it's not known whether either of those issues came into play with the 51-year-old who died.

In 2007, the latest data available, 75 Lee County residents died from seasonal flu, an illness that takes some 36,000 lives in the United States every year.

As of this morning, Lee County has seen 43 confirmed cases of swine flu. Another three cases are considered likely. There may have been other cases that did not go through the laboratory and confirmation process. Florida as of this morning had 2,816 known cases and 18 deaths. That's 628-case and six-death jump from last Friday's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention count.

"One of the major messages is that this flu season never really stopped," said Jennifer James-Mesloh, spokeswoman for the Lee County Department of Health.

Stephen Streed, Lee Memorial Health System's head of infection control, said he has seen an uptick in the number of patients presenting to emergency rooms with influenza-like symptoms in the past few days. Streed said he's not sure why that is, although a recent round of news articles may have increased the ER traffic. When swine flu hit the news in early April, more than 100 patients a day were seeking treatment at Lee Memorial facilities, Streed said. He expects news of Lee County's first death will drive up the number of patients seeking doctors' care.

Federal health officials recently approved the vaccine to be used to fight seasonal influenza and are working on a vaccine for swine flu. Flu season in the United States usually starts around October; in

Florida it picks up as the tourism season kicks in. State and county health departments and area hospitals are preparing for a major vaccination campaign for both seasonal and swine flu.

"The Department of Health is taking this extremely seriously," James-Mesloh said.

12:39 p.m. update

The Lee County Health Department has received notification that a 51-year-old male died Tuesday from of a swine flu-related illness.

[Check out our special Plug In page on swine flu](#)

"Our deepest sympathies are extended to family and friends. We have continued to see influenza activity over the summer. Therefore, we urge people to take precautions against flu-illness by following proper hygiene" said Dr. Judith A. Hartner, director of the Lee County Health Department.

Since April when the first cases of H1N1 virus (swine flu) were identified in Lee County, 43 residents have been confirmed with one death resulting from H1N1. For Lee County, the trend appears to be mirroring the state and national trends where the majority of cases are concentrated in children.

Florida has had 2,188 confirmed and probable cases of swine flu and 12 deaths, as of last Friday, the latest available count from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Lee County schools remain closed for summer break, but with one month before classes begin, school officials continue to monitor swine flu.

"We obviously didn't know there would be a death here, but we do know the H1N1 flu has not gone away, and we're even more concerned with what happens when students return," said Sharon Warnecke, coordinator for health services with the Lee County School District. "Schools are like Petri dishes because we have so many children in small spaces."

When concern over swine flu hit its peak in late April and early May, Lee schools took extra precautions to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. It closed Spring Creek Elementary in Bonita Springs for three days, isolated students exhibiting flu-like symptoms, minimized physical contact between children and suspended its policy banning hand sanitizer from classrooms.

"We still push hand washing rather than hand sanitizer because good hand washing is still the best way to prevent illness," Warnecke said.

The Lee County Health Department urges people to wash their hands frequently, stay home from work or school if they feel ill, and cover their mouths with a tissue or their sleeve if they are coughing. These common sense precautions will greatly reduce the risk of transmission of all flu virus whether seasonal or H1N1 (swine flu).
