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Swine flu death jolts Lee County

Plans set to curb spread of disease

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• Chat replay: [Your swine flu questions answered](#)

It's unclear why swine flu, which has attacked at least 43 Lee County residents, killed a 51-year-old man who reported no other health complications.

The influenza A strain has mostly been mild and the vast majority of swine flu victims nationally who died had other health issues, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention spokesman Tom Skinner.

Influenza can kill when it overtakes the respiratory system or when secondary bacterial infections attack the body.

Nationally, seasonal influenza kills about 36,000 people a year; swine flu, or H1N1 influenza, had claimed 263 people in the United States as of Friday.

As of Wednesday in Florida, swine flu had killed 22, according to figures released by the Florida Department of Health. The department also reported 2,915 confirmed cases of H1N1 influenza.

Health experts say there is sometimes no good explanation why one person can weather the flu without so much as a doctor's visit, some land in the hospital and others lose their lives. Obesity can play a role.

So can delaying care. So, too, can drug therapies; some people don't respond well to the drugs used to treat influenza.

"At this point all we have is the antiviral, and if you don't respond to that, they don't have a lot of other things they can do," said Jennifer James-Mesloh, a spokeswoman for the Lee County Department of Health.

It's not known whether that was the case for the man who died in Lee. Health department officials won't release any further information on the case, citing state and federal privacy laws, and won't say whether an autopsy will be or has been performed. Lee's medical examiner's office Wednesday did not appear to have any reports on the flu victim.

Vaccinations

On Wednesday, the National Institutes of Health announced it will start testing the newly developed

H1N1 vaccines on volunteers beginning in late August. If the inoculation proves safe and effective, it will become available for public use this fall. Some individuals, such as children who have never received flu vaccines, may need two shots, administered 21 days apart, the CDC's Skinner said.

Locally, hospital and public health officials are gearing up for a community vaccination campaign. This week's swine flu death serves as a reminder that the virus can strike down even reportedly healthy middle-aged adults.

"I think it speaks to the need for everyone to take precautions," said Stephen Streed, the head of infection control for Lee Memorial Health System. The health system wants to get at least 90 percent of its work force vaccinated, a measure that protects medical workers' own health, as well as that of the public, Streed said.

The health system is expecting to see more patients visit its emergency rooms and clinics in the wake of the man's death; already in the past few days there has been an uptick in the number of patients coming in with influenza-like symptoms. Streed said he didn't know why that was, although it could stem from recent news reports about swine flu and a few isolated instances of drug resistance.

Lee County does have a supply of Tamiflu, one of two drugs used to treat influenza. The health department has about 3,600 10-day courses for adults and 687 bottles for infants and children. It was not immediately clear how many children those bottles could treat because dosage depends on factors such as the child's weight. In addition to the health department supply, hospitals and other medical providers have their own stocks, James-Mesloh said.

Getting ready

Public health officials have spent the summer preparing for fall flu vaccination season with unusual intensity. James-Mesloh said state public health officials have held biweekly teleconferences to talk about preparedness. A statewide gathering will be held next week in Kissimmee to plan for a vaccination campaign, James-Mesloh said. They're holding the summit now even though the federal government hasn't released the swine flu vaccine.

"Just because you don't have a hurricane sitting off the Gulf doesn't mean you don't plan for hurricane season," James-Mesloh said. "What we don't want is a big lag time. ... We want to be prepared."

Typically, more people skip the flu shots than receive them. In 2007, the latest data available, about 38 percent of Lee County adults had received a flu shot within the past year. Statewide, the figure was about 33 percent.

Local health directors are reaching out to school district officials, in case the CDC recommends giving vaccinations in schools. That decision hasn't been made, Skinner said, but school-aged children will be a target of vaccination efforts. The virus has been striking mostly young people.

In Lee County, the youngest flu case was a 1-year-old and the oldest a 60-year-old. The median age of a swine flu patient is 8, James-Mesloh said.

Lee County School District officials continue to monitor the virus' spread.

"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," 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.

Additional Facts

Q & A

Q. How can a person who is otherwise healthy die from swine flu?

A. It's unclear. Most victims have had other health issues that made them susceptible to the virus. Other issues — delaying care, the body's response to medications, obesity, for example — can play a role.

Q. What are Lee County schools doing now before classes start next month, considering the district closed one school last school year after students there tested positive for H1N1?

A. School officials continue to monitor the situation. The school district continues to emphasize the use of hand sanitizers and good hygiene.

Q. What are the plans for developing a vaccine for the disease known as novel H1N1?

A. The U.S. government is working with manufacturers to take steps in the process to manufacture a novel H1N1 vaccine. Working with scientists, the CDC has isolated the new H1N1 virus and modified the virus so it can be used to make hundreds of millions of doses of vaccine. Vaccine manufacturers are using these materials to begin vaccine production. Making vaccine is a multi-step process which takes several months to complete and is the most powerful public health tool for control of influenza, and . Candidate vaccines will be tested in clinical trials over the few months.

Q. When will the novel H1N1 vaccine will be available?

A. The novel H1N1 vaccine is expected to be available in the fall. More specific dates cannot be provided at this time as vaccine availability depends on several factors including manufacturing time and time needed to conduct clinical trials.

Q. Will the seasonal flu vaccine also protect against the H1N1 flu?

A. The seasonal flu vaccine is not expected to protect against the novel H1N1 flu.

Q. Can the seasonal vaccine and the novel H1N1 vaccine be given at the same time?

A. Clinical trial results will be necessary to confirm novel H1N1 and seasonal vaccine will be safe and effective if given at the same time. The seasonal vaccine is expected to be available earlier than the H1N1 vaccine. The usual seasonal influenza viruses are expected to cause illness this fall and winter. Individuals are encouraged to get their seasonal flu vaccine as soon as it is available.

Q. Who will be recommended as priority groups to receive the novel H1N1 vaccine?

A. Based on what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is seeing with the virus and epidemiologic data, states, communities, and health care providers should begin planning strategies

for how they will vaccinate children and younger adults, pregnant women, health care personnel, and people with underlying health conditions.

Q. Where will the vaccine be available?

A. Every state is developing a vaccine delivery plan. The vaccine will be available in a combination of settings such as vaccination clinics organized by local health departments, health care provider offices, schools, and other private settings, such as pharmacies and workplaces.

Q. Are there other ways to prevent the spread of illness?

A. Take everyday actions to stay healthy.

Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.

Wash hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hands cleaners also are effective.

Avoid touching eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread that way.

Stay home if you get sick. CDC recommends you stay home from work or school and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them.

Q. What about the use of antivirals to treat novel H1N1 infection?

A. Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaled powder) that fight against the flu by keeping flu viruses from reproducing in your body. If you get sick, antiviral drugs can make your illness milder and make you feel better faster. They also may prevent serious flu complications. This fall, antivirals may be prioritized for persons with severe illness or those at higher risk for flu complications.

Source: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
