

CDC: Swine flu is expected to infect 40 percent of U.S.

Vaccinations urged for citizens when available

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The Centers for Disease Control is predicting the H1N1 virus, or swine flu, will infect 40 percent of the American population over the next two years, and that several hundred thousand could die worldwide during that time if they are not properly vaccinated.

Despite a lag in media attention in Florida and abroad, the Lee County Health Department is stressing yet again all the necessary precautions to protect oneself against the virus following the death of a 51-year-old man last week in Lee County, the first from H1N1.

Spokeswoman Jennifer James-Mesloh said the health organization is doing what it can to stress the importance of flu shots as flu season draws near.

"Typically about 32 (percent to) 35 percent of people in Lee County get a flu shot each year," she said. "While significant, there are still 68 percent percent of our population of 620,000 that typically do not get a flu shot. Therefore, the LCHD urges people to get the H1N1 vaccine when it becomes available this year in order to prevent the illness from spreading."

The CDC and the World Health Organization are concerned that the speed in which the virus spreads will be ramped up dramatically once the school year gets under way.

James-Mesloh said the LCHD is working closely with the Lee County School District in order to educate students and teachers in hopes of quelling any potential mass outbreaks, though she admitted that there are no guarantees against stopping the spread of the illness.

"We still need people to be aware that no matter how good the plans are to prevent spreading the disease, they still need to take precautions and keep up the hand washing and use alcohol-based sanitizers when soap and water is not available," she said.

The United States is expected to have upward of 160 million doses of swine flu vaccine in October.

The LCHD is unsure of how many of those vaccines will make their way to Lee County, but James-Mesloh said it should be available to residents in early November.

While the vaccine might not fully prevent contracting the virus, she said it will help.

"If people get the H1N1 vaccine along with its booster, they will dramatically reduce their risk of contracting the disease," James-Mesloh said.

The World Health Organization is predicting that 2 billion people may become infected with the swine flu, nearly one-third of the world's population.

There have been 302 swine flu related deaths in America, with more than 20 in Florida.

There have been 46 confirmed cases of swine flu in Lee County, with one death.