

August 7, 2009

## Lee County's swine flu outlook grim

### Health officials issue sobering predictions

By JENNIFER BOOTH REED  
[jreed@news-press.com](mailto:jreed@news-press.com)

Think of this not as cause to panic but as reason to prepare:

If state health projections hold true, the swine flu will double Lee County's annual death toll from influenza.

New health department data estimate 160 Lee County residents will die from the swine flu - or H1N1 influenza - in the next 18 to 24 months, the life cycle of a pandemic. That's in addition to the 80 or so Lee residents who die each year from seasonal flu.

The Lee figures were calculated by the local health department using new data from the Florida Department of Health's Bureau of Epidemiology.

H1N1 influenza is a novel virus, meaning it's a strain that hasn't circulated before and people don't have the immunity to it that they might have to other strains.

Because of that, the infection rate for swine flu is expected to be much higher than seasonal flu - some 30 to 40 percent of the population during the pandemic compared to the 5 to 20 percent who fall ill from a more typical flu. The state projection suggests 5 million Floridians and 160,000 Lee County residents will fall sick during the pandemic cycle.

Lee County has seen two deaths from the swine flu, both men in their 50s. The state has had 41 deaths.

"I think we do have to be more vigilant than we would in the past," said Jennifer James-Mesloh, the Lee County Health Department spokeswoman. "We don't know if this virus is going to change on us. We don't know if it's going to mutate."

She says that not to spark public panic, but to remind people that they can take steps to prevent flu - frequent handwashing, staying home when sick, getting vaccinated when the inoculations become available this fall.

"We have to think of precautionary measures," James-Mesloh said. "This is really a proactive personal responsibility."

Pregnant women are at particular risk, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have put them as the No. 1 priority for the swine flu vaccination.

"When women are pregnant they are less able to fight viral infections in general," explained Dr. Rex

Stubbs, an obstetrician with Physicians Primary Care in Fort Myers.

Women who develop the flu risk miscarriage if they are early in their pregnancies and pre-term delivery later on. Stubbs recommends women try to avoid exposure, seek treatment early if they start showing signs and get vaccinated once the shots become available.

People contract the disease through droplets - yes, that's the spit or mucus of people infected with the virus.

Anyone within 3 to 6 feet of an infectious person who is coughing or sneezing is at risk, said Dr. Stephen Zellner, an infectious disease specialist with Internal Medicine Associates in Fort Myers. The virus doesn't carry well beyond that distance.

His practice has treated a number of patients with Tamiflu, the antiviral drug commonly prescribed to fight the disease. Family members and others who've come in close contact are often prescribed the drug as a precautionary measure, Zellner said.

"We don't know how easy or how hard it is to transmit this virus. We don't know how aggressive it is. We don't know how virulent it is," Zellner said. "It's not that everybody is going to get this. But we just don't know."

He, too, urged caution - but not alarm. If you're sick, stay away from others. See a doctor, Zellner advised.

The swine flu virus has hit younger people particularly hard, whereas seasonal flu is more associated with the aged. Health officials theorize that older people were exposed to other flu viruses in their lives that may offer some enhanced immunity for H1N1.

Federal health and education agencies are expected to announce new guidelines for managing flu in schools this morning.

Dr. Emilio Del Valle of Del Valle Pediatrics said he as had at least 10 cases of influenza A in the past two months. H1N1 is an A-type influenza, and health officials believe most A cases surfacing this summer are likely swine flu. Flu season typically starts in September and runs through February.

"Rarely do you see anybody in March, but this year we did. Rarely do you see anybody in April, but this year we did. Rarely do you see anybody in June and July but we did," Del Valle said.

The children he treated all recovered well.

Coughs and sniffles don't warrant a trip to the doctor, Del Valle said. But coughs and sniffles accompanied by fever, aches, red eyes or related tell-tale signs of flu must be taken seriously. Tamiflu is most effective when administered 24 to 48 hours after someone starts showing symptoms.

"The younger they are, the sooner you come to the doctor. The higher the fever and the more prolonged the fever, the sooner you come to the doctor. The more ill a child acts, the faster you come to the doctor," Del Valle said.

---