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Swine flu won't be reason to close schools

Feds issue more lenient guidelines for fall

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As the nation's 55 million schoolchildren prepare to go back to the classroom, the federal government Friday issued new guidelines on how schools should handle this fall's inevitable flu outbreaks.

Their advice in short: Schools stay open. Sick kids go home.

The guidelines were far more manageable than the ones initially released last spring when swine flu, or the H1N1 virus, was first identified. At the time, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended school closures of 14 days if cases emerged and said children should stay home for seven days after their fevers break.

The agency quickly reversed the school closure decision, saying last May that schools should remain open unless the outbreak was big enough to interrupt normal operations.

The guidelines issued Friday went a step further, saying students and staff could go back to school 24 hours after a fever subsides, if temperature remains normal without the use of fever-reducing medications.

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan also encouraged school districts to partner with local health agencies to offer in-school vaccination clinics - something that Lee County school and health officials are planning to do.

The recommendations are based on swine flu remaining a relatively mild strain. Schools should also preach good hygiene, isolate sick students and staff, and sanitize surfaces that students and teachers often touch, such as keyboards.

The guidelines were welcome news.

"It's very disruptive for learning, for the families," Vicki Parks, Three Oaks Elementary principal, said of school closures.

Other steps

The CDC, in conjunction with other federal agencies, also outlined what to do if the virus gets more severe:

- Schools should consider actively screening children for fever and signs of respiratory infection.

- Schools with large populations of high-risk students - such as those for pregnant teens or for students with special medical needs - may want to consider closure. Other schools that remain open may want to dismiss those high-risk students.

- Schools may consider asking students to stay home if a family member is sick.

- Schools may consider increasing "social distances" within the school environment. That means, for example, having children sit greater distances apart from each other.

- Schools should be ready to offer other kinds of instruction - such as online courses or home studies - if schools are dismissed.

"We absolutely hope no schools will have to close, but realistically, some schools will close this fall," Duncan said.

He and other federal officials stressed that school closures are a local decision and the CDC recommendations are only a guideline.

Lee plans

In Lee County, where about 78,000 students will return to classes Aug. 24, school officials have drafted influenza plans.

"We just had a planning meeting, and we were discussing what we were going to do, and all of the things they talked about today we were planning to do anyway," said Sharon Warnecke, school district health services coordinator, referring to the government's Friday announcement.

The district will isolate children or staff who show signs of illness, ensure children have opportunities to wash their hands during the day and will help community surveillance efforts by tracking school absenteeism. Students also will be allowed to use hand sanitizers.

The district intends to play a big part in communitywide vaccination efforts, partnering with the county health department and Visiting Nurses Association this fall to offer flu shots.

Dates and locations haven't been established, but Warnecke said the district hopes to open six schools - two in each school zone - for families seeking seasonal flu shots. They also will hold special immunization clinics for the swine flu virus once that vaccine is available. It is expected to be released in mid-October.

Vaccines

There will be two separate and unique vaccines for flu this fall - an inoculation for seasonal flu and a separate one for the swine flu, which emerged last spring. The swine flu vaccine will likely be administered in two doses given three weeks apart.

Federal funds will pay for seasonal flu shots for children younger than 18 and for swine flu shots for people determined to be at high risk of contracting that strain - children and young adults, pregnant women, health-care workers and people with other health conditions.

The district also will play a significant role educating the county's public school students and their families about circulating flu strains, vaccination opportunities and staying healthy. Outreach efforts

will be multilingual.

"It's going to be so confusing to people," worried Warnecke, referring to seasonal and swine flu, the different terminology being used to describe the newly emerged virus - "swine flu," "H1N1 influenza," "pandemic flu." The World Health Organization in June declared the flu to be a pandemic because of its global spread. It still remains a relatively mild illness in most people, though 353 people in the United States have died. Two people have died in Lee County.

Parks, the elementary principal, said she plans to make good hand hygiene a priority and will make sure, for example, that children have a chance to wash their hands before lunch.

"We're going to make it a fun thing. Advertise on the news how to stay healthy for school, healthy eating, exercising," Parks said.
