



October 15, 2009

Cape Coral woman dies of swine flu

By Rachel Revehl
rrevehl@news-press.com

A 30-year-old Cape Coral woman has died from swine flu, making her the fourth and youngest person to succumb to the virus in Lee County since a worldwide pandemic was announced in June.

The woman's death highlights a major concern health officials have about the swine flu virus: Younger people and pregnant women are especially at risk.

Lee's health department spokeswoman said her agency was notified of the woman's death Wednesday, though it was not immediately clear when she died.

The woman had been hospitalized, but she had no medical conditions that would have put her at risk for flu complications. The health department did not say whether she was pregnant.

"We offer our sincere condolences to this woman's family and friends for their loss" said health department director Dr. Judith A. Hartner.

Of the 112 swine flu-related Florida deaths reported as of Wednesday to the World Health Organization, 20 were younger than 24. They had no underlying medical conditions.

Children and young adults between the ages of 6 months and 24 years are at particular risk, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said. Five additional pediatric swine flu deaths have been reported since late last week, bringing to 81 the total count of U.S. children who have died with the infection, the CDC said.

Pregnant women are at a higher risk because their immune systems behave differently, James-Mesloh said.

"Tragically, approximately one-third of the pregnant women who have contracted the virus have died," she said.

Why have younger, healthier people and pregnant women been stricken more severely?

James-Mesloh explained that is likely because the swine flu virus strain is new. People born before 1957 were likely exposed to a similar strain, and might have developed some level of immunity.

Some 20-somethings don't buy it.

"I don't think swine flu is even real," said Jenna Clark, 21, of Fort Myers. "Or if it is real, I don't believe in taking vaccines for something not totally credible."

Antonio Nobregas, 26, said he doesn't like the idea of the vaccine, and has always preferred holistic medications to the traditional over-the-counter drugs.

"I'm a firm believer in other forms of medicine," Nobregas said, "and nothing recommended by doctors."

Until Wednesday, Lee's victims had been slightly older than the state average - a 57-year-old woman and men ages 51 and 53.

The county health department is expected to begin offering free vaccinations Oct. 26.

Others who are at risk of contracting swine flu are people who live with or care for children younger than 6 months, health care workers and emergency medical services personnel, and people ages 25 through 64 who have health conditions associated with higher risk of medical complications from the flu.

Those groups - as well as pregnant women and young children - will be given first priority for vaccination.

A detailed list of vaccination schedules hasn't been released, James-Mesloh said, because the department is still waiting for the doses to be shipped from the federal government. Originally, they were expected to arrive in time to distribute them by Monday.

But James-Mesloh explained researchers have been working to produce two vaccines this year - for swine flu and the regular seasonal flu. The date had to be postponed.

The department is hoping to have the clinics over five weeks, administering 90,000 total vaccinations. When they become available, the department will launch a large public-awareness campaign, advertising in The News-Press and other local publications as well as broadcast outlets.

Meanwhile, the department has more time to recruit volunteers for its vaccination efforts, James-Mesloh. The department needs about 2,000 volunteers to help operate two clinics. It now has 600.

Additional Facts

To Volunteer

Volunteer applications are available at leechd.com. Look under Public Health Information and click on H1N1 Volunteer Application. Or call 332-9510.
