

County to start offering vaccination for H1N1

Shots available today at health department, select high schools

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After weeks of eagerly awaiting the vaccine for the H1N1 virus, the Lee County Health Department and partnering governmental agencies unrolled their plans to begin doling out the shot starting this morning.

Both the health department and local high schools are offering the vaccines until Nov. 21.

State and county health departments labeled the spread of H1N1 in Lee County as widespread, meaning that outbreaks were detected in multiple settings - emergency rooms or the Lee County Health Department.

For weeks the spread of the virus was localized. Dr. Judith Hartner, director of the Lee County Health Department, said local trends have teetered on the line between the two labels.

"Only four states don't have widespread flu activity," said Hartner.

The department recently planned on downgrading to localized, but the number of patients reporting flu-like symptoms is on the increase, she said.

Emergency rooms typically treat 2 percent of their patient population for flu-like symptoms between December and February, but hospitals have recently seen as many as 5 percent of their patients with these symptoms.

This dramatic increase is nearly one month before the official flu season begins.

The Lee County Health Department has received \$1.6 million in federal funds from the Centers for Disease Control to conduct the H1N1 vaccination campaign. Officials requested 27,000 doses of the vaccine, but delivery is staggered.

Distribution of the vaccine is based on a formula that the health department uses to determine its own supply, the amount of people

who need it within the priority groups and the amount it will hand over to public clinics and private providers.

Officials do not know how many people will show up for the vaccine in the coming weeks, but Hartner said she expects many based on the number of phone calls the department has received.

"Some counties in Florida have done public clinics and have had little people show up," she said.

The first wave of vaccines are being given to priority groups, including pregnant women, small children and people with underlying conditions. Most deaths have occurred in people ranging in age from 40 to 50, yet each had underlying conditions, said Hartner.

A 30-year-old Cape Coral woman was hospitalized this month after contracting the virus and died the next day due to complications from a case of double pneumonia from underlying respiratory problems. There have been four deaths in Lee County.

Hartner said the high-risk groups may change as the season unfolds.

"We are learning a lot as this disease rolls out," she said. "The priority groups might change."

Local high schools offering the vaccine will not be interrupted by the flow of patients. According to Dr. James Browder, superintendent of the Lee County School District, high schools were chosen because they are bustling with activity late into the night.

"If you look at the times, they are after the school day," he said. "We aren't doing it when students are in school."

Browder stressed that clinics will not be costly to the school district, and that the Lee County Health Department is reimbursing the district for any expenditures.

"It doesn't put a load on the district," he said.

Students are not required to get the vaccine, but can wait after school to get it if they wish. Any children under the age of 18 need a parental signature to get the H1N1 vaccine.

The United Way also continues to sign up volunteers to assist with the campaign. So far the agency has had 950 people sign up by calling 211 or 433-3900. More volunteers are needed.

The Lee County Sheriff's Office will deploy seven to nine units per school during the open clinic hours, said Capt. Rich Schnieders.

Lee Memorial employees have also braced for the vaccination campaign. Some 2,000 medical staffers have already been vaccinated. John Wilson, director of the Lee County Emergency Management, said paramedics are scheduled to get their shots soon.

Symptoms of the H1N1 virus include fever, cough, runny nose and body aches. The health department reported that the H1N1 vaccine is created much like the traditional flu shot, and the CDC has not linked any vaccines with Guillain-Barre Syndrome, a nerve disorder found in people who received a swine flu shot in 1976.

Dr. Timothy Dougherty, medical director of the emergency department at Cape Coral Hospital, said prevention is the best way to avoid contracting H1N1.

"The best treatment for H1N1 is prevention, something as simple as constant hand washing, not exposing yourself to someone who is sick and getting the vaccine," he said.

Some physicians are choosing not to vaccinate their patients.

Hartner said the department is encouraging private physicians, specifically OB-GYNs and pediatricians, to offer the vaccine.

"We have been encouraging physicians to provide the vaccine in their office," she said.