

Long lines at first day of swine flu vaccination clinics in Lee

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They started arriving at 6 a.m.

By 10 a.m. Thursday, when the doors were to open, Lee County residents awaiting the H1N1 vaccine at South Fort Myers High School formed a line that snaked through the school, out the doors and beneath a covered walkway running the length of the school's facade. However, by about noon, that line had all but disappeared.

Just before vaccinations began Thursday, some people heard murmurs about two-hour wait times and abandoned the lines, saying they would come back later in the day or attend another vaccination clinic.

"I'm pretty frustrated," said Elena Hoffman, who left the school just before 10 a.m. after arriving 20 minutes early. "I thought I got here early. I'm pregnant, I have a son who's 2 years old — I can't keep him entertained for two-and-a-half hours."

However, officials with the Lee County Health Department are advising against arriving early to the vaccination clinics, which will continue through the third week of November.

"What we're telling people is, 'Don't come early; you will wait in line,'" said Jennifer James-Mesloh, spokeswoman for the Lee County Health Department. "We'll have plenty of opportunity for people in the priority group to get vaccinated."

Thursday marked the first day of public vaccination clinics for people in high-risk groups in Lee County. Health department officials initially planned to start vaccinating people at Lee County's public high schools on Oct. 19 but the vaccine's production was slower than expected. County health departments have just begun to receive shipments of the vaccine after expecting them to arrive starting in mid-October.

By Thursday afternoon, initial tallies from the health department showed that roughly 3,300 had been vaccinated at both sites.

Officials at a press conference Wednesday said they anticipated seeing about 4,000 people at each clinic.

First through the line at South Fort Myers High School was James-Mesloh's son, Perry, 7.

Surrounded by television and still cameras, Perry grimaced as he received a shot of the nasal mist vaccine up each nostril. He gave a double thumbs up after wiping the excess from his nose.

"It feels strange," said Perry. "It feels like water being shot up your nose when you're jumping into a pool."

James-Mesloh said Lee's health department started the day with 9,000 vaccinations available, and are expecting another two shipments soon.

James-Mesloh recommended that anyone planning to attend a clinic go to the Lee County Health Department Web site first: leechd.com. From there, residents can print the required consent form and fill it out before arriving at a clinic.

It is also important to read the list of medical conditions or age groups that qualify a person to receive the vaccination, she said. Vaccines for the general public are not currently being offered by the Lee County Health Department.

The clinics for members of the high-risk groups will continue through Nov. 21, with clinics held most weekdays in one or two Lee County high schools.

The health department describes high-risk populations as pregnant women, household contacts and caregivers of infants under 6 months old, people between 6 months and 24 years old, health-care workers and people who have cancer, blood disorders, chronic lung disease, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disorders, liver disorders, neurological disorders, neuromuscular disorders and weakened immune systems.

Tom and Debra Welter, Cape Coral residents, both fall into one of those categories. Tom Welter, 53, has diabetes, and Debra Welter works in health care. They also brought their 4-year-old daughter, Autumn, to get vaccinated.

“We’re trying to be proactive,” said Tom Welter. “My other daughter, who is 21 years old and has an 11-month-old baby, doesn’t believe in it. She says it was rushed through and it’s not tested. I said, ‘The president, his daughters got it. Of course it’s safe.’”

The Welters arrived at South Fort Myers High School about 9:45 Thursday morning, and by 11 a.m. they were more than halfway through the line that started forming just after 6 a.m.

“They seem to be moving up pretty quickly,” said volunteer Nancy Campbell.

She and fellow volunteer Francine Stagg worked the line, handing out consent forms and finding chairs for elderly people. They joined 69 other non-medical volunteers and 78 medical staff who worked at South Fort Myers to get roughly 1,560 people through the lines there.

“The only complaint we have heard is that they should have bottled water out here — even to sell,” Stagg said.

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