

Locals line up at public clinics for shot at first H1N1 vaccines

First doses for those labeled

By MCKENZIE CASSIDY, mcassidy@breezenewspapers.com Hundreds of people waited in line Thursday morning at public clinics at South Fort Myers High School and at Mariner High School to be the first in Lee County to get the H1N1 vaccine.

Distribution of the vaccine has been delayed nearly two weeks from the original release date of mid-October, yet long lines still stretched around both schools to get the shot or the nasal mist.

The high school clinics will offer free vaccines to "priority" groups - pregnant women, health care providers, children and people with underlying medical conditions - until Nov. 21.

Certain underlying medical conditions that qualify people to get the vaccine include asthma, cancer, diabetes, heart disease and weakened immune disorders.

Fort Myers resident Heather Quinn waited in line for nearly 30 minutes to get her shot. Quinn, pregnant and in her final trimester, said the line stretched around the bus loop at South Fort Myers High.

"At first I was against it, I thought I'd be fine if I just drank a lot of water, but that realistically isn't feasible," she said. "I might as well get it now or I'll have to wait until my son is 6 months old."

As a pregnant woman, Quinn fell into the high priority group. She added that many of her friends and their children contracted swine flu and missed work or school. Recently, she asked her doctor about whether she should get the vaccine and he recommended it.

County residents waited in a long line twisting through the school until they reached the cafeteria.

Once inside they filled out a vaccine consent form, asking among other things whether they are allergic to eggs, ever had a serious reaction to a flu shot or developed Guillain-Barre Syndrome, a dangerous nerve disorder, after receiving a vaccine.

During an epidemic of another strain of swine flu in 1976, some patients developed Guillain-Barre after getting the vaccine, but the CDC has found no links between the new vaccine and the nerve disorder.

Bobbi Clark, a Fort Myers grandmother, visited the clinic with her granddaughter. She originally wanted the shot from her physician, but could not get an appointment until Tuesday and opted not to wait.

Not only is Clark a senior citizen, but she has Type 2 diabetes and was worried about what could happen if she did not receive the vaccine.

Her granddaughter would get the nasal mist, designed for patients ages 2-49.

"You just don't know, so you don't take chances," Clark said.

Dr. Judith Hartner, director of the Lee County Health Department, said it was hard to know how many people would show up to one of the clinics, yet the turnout was on par with their estimates.

The large crowd was likely an effect of children having the day off from school and that Thursday was the opening day for vaccines.

"It's about what we expected," Hartner said. "The first hours are the busiest."

The health department had a supply of approximately 4,000 doses of the vaccine. By noon, it had gone through close to 200, she said.

Some 30 stations were set up inside the cafeteria to administer each the vaccines.

Although the clinics are designed for people who fall under the high priority groups, Hartner said no one will be turned away from receiving a vaccine.

Instead, department officials hope that people are honest enough to not get a vaccine unless they fall in one of the priority groups.

"We aren't turning people away, but we are asking people to be honest," she said.

Joe Donzelli, spokesperson for the Lee County School District, said lines began forming at South Fort Myers at 6 a.m., even though the clinic doors did not open until after 10 a.m.

He added that the average wait was 15 minutes.

Receiving the shot does not feel any different than the regular seasonal flu shot, officials said.

Children under the age of 18 need a parent or guardian signature to receive the vaccine, and forms are available in multiple languages.