

VIDEOS Flu not prevalent at FGCU, but school leaders still wary

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ESTERO — You can lead a student to the university, but you can't make him or her get vaccinated against the flu.

Health officials at Florida Gulf Coast University are racing against the clock before the height of flu season to get students vaccinated against the novel strain of H1N1 also known as swine flu.

At the university, cases of flu-like illness are coming in at a trickle, averaging 17 cases a week so far this academic year. The school hit a high in the second and third weeks of September, with 30 and 31 cases, respectively.

"At the beginning of the semester, we saw a higher number," said Brian Fisher, director of university housing. "That might make sense because people were coming back and bringing things with them."

For the last week information was reported, Nov. 9 through 13, just five cases of influenza-like illness were reported to the American College Health Association, down from 11 cases the previous week.

Students seen at FGCU's Student Health Service aren't tested specifically for H1N1; doctors make diagnoses based on observed symptoms.

"Maybe 5 percent of the visits we see each day are for influenza-like illness," said Dr. Kevin Collins, a physician at FGCU's Student Health Services. "Initially I think all of the university health centers expected to be inundated."

That hasn't happened, said Collins, but staff members at the university health center still are trying to be vigilant. College students are an important demographic to get vaccinated, said Jennifer James-Mesloh, spokeswoman for

the Lee County Health Department, because they are often in close quarters together.

“You’ve got multiple people using the same equipment, so to speak,” James-Mesloh said. “Most people that are in a work environment, for example you don’t have (more than one person) using the same computer terminal.”

Freshman Alex McMichael said he hasn’t been vaccinated, but will make an effort soon.

“I do use those hand sanitizers that are around, four or five times a day,” said McMichael, referring to the stations placed all over campus common areas. “I’m always around other people, in other peoples’ rooms. I just had lunch with 12 kids at one table. I’m sure I spit on one of them at least once.”

H1N1 vaccines have been available to students since mid-October, but students have been slow to seek the vaccination, Student Health Services Director Eileen Dondero said. That is worrisome, she said, because the World Health Organization is predicting a second and third wave of increases in illness.

“We’ve prepared for being overrun with patients,” Collins said. “It has not happened yet. I would not be surprised if that happens in February or March. We are still not in the height of the flu season.”

Collins said he has heard of two students who have been hospitalized off-campus due to complications from flu-like illness. The university cannot offer acute care to students, though it provides regular outpatient services like routine check-ups, regardless of insurance status.

“My dad’s a doctor, my sister went to get it ... and I have a one-year-old brother at home, so it was worth going to get it to prevent giving it to him,” said FGCU student Pam Javier, a senior.

Matthew Estevez, a freshman, got the shot because he was urged to by his mom, a nurse practitioner. He got his H1N1 vaccination off campus, and his seasonal flu shot on campus.

"If it's available to me, I should take advantage of it," Estevez said.

However, the campus health service has run out of seasonal flu vaccine since Estevez got his.

"They made less seasonal flu vaccine this year than they have in years past because they had to switch production because the H1N1 vaccine is made in exactly the same way; it's an egg-based vaccine," said James-Mesloh, whose agency also ran out of seasonal flu vaccine roughly one month ago, similar to agencies across the state.

The university has issued a set of guidelines and reminders to students regarding the flu. That includes e-mailing professors to alert them of an illness, and says the university's Division of Student Affairs is working with the Division of Academic Affairs to "address issues of missed classes due to H1N1."

"We've had a few student staff (members) who have gotten it and the feedback has been that it's a little milder than the normal flu," Fisher said.

But Collins practically pleads with students to get the vaccine, regardless of how mild past cases have been.

"I will be heartbroken if one student dies from H1N1," Collins said. "We are doing everything we can to get them in and get them vaccinated."

The university is following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations for vaccinating priority groups, which includes anyone between the ages of 6 months and 24 years, as well as people with pre-existing conditions.

Because the vast majority of FGCU students fall into that age range, most students are eligible for vaccination. Out of a student population of more than 10,000, only 600 people have been vaccinated against H1N1 at Student Health Services.

“The really serious issue is there is just a lack of interest in getting vaccinated,” Collins said. “When I see a student, I ask for just one good reason not to get a vaccination. ... It’s very discouraging from a health-care perspective that we cannot get students to come in for vaccinations.”

So far, James-Mesloh said her agency has focused its outreach on parents and pregnant women. In January, the Lee County Health Department will be teaming up with a public relations class at FGCU to design a campaign to spread the word among 18- to 24-year-olds about the importance of getting vaccinated.

“Honestly, I think once we really start to target that demographic, I think Student (Health) Services will not have trouble getting students to get that vaccine,” James-Mesloh said. “It’s not really something they’ve kind of thought about, and up until this point, we haven’t really targeted them strongly.”

If you are a student or staff member at FGCU who falls into a priority group and would like to get vaccinated, call (239) 590-1254 for more information or visit studentservices.fgcu.edu/Healthservices.