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Swine flu forgotten, not gone

Outbreak's over, but threat remains

BY LYNNE ANDERSON • SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS • MAY 24, 2010

1:10 A.M. — Swine flu - remember when it caused people to stop shaking hands at graduations and at church, and Lee County parents to be concerned about vaccinating their kids, after the first case was diagnosed last May? It needn't scare people anymore, officials said, but they should still consider vaccinations, especially those who fall into a high risk category, such as pregnant women and those older than 65 or with a chronic health condition.

Swine flu caused five deaths in Lee County from May 1, 2009, to May 11, said Jennifer James-Mesloh, spokeswoman for the Lee County Health Department.

At least 227 people died in Florida from the illness, she said. The Lee deaths included an 11-year-old girl.

While it's still a threat, the swine flu strain has lost momentum, although it's hard to say why.

"It is a totally unpredictable and baffling virus," said Jeff Diamond, spokesman for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It's likely people have gained immunity through vaccination and contraction of the virus, Diamond said.

Better hygiene as a result of public awareness campaigns also may have played a part, he said.

H1N1 influenza, also known as swine flu, is a respiratory illness normally seen in pigs. There have been outbreaks in humans at various times over the years. Last summer, the World Health Organization declared a worldwide pandemic.

While no deaths have occurred in Lee since autumn, James-Mesloh said the virus is still infecting people.

"It's still out there," James-Mesloh said by e-mail. "Laboratory tests show that the huge majority of influenza cultures taken in Florida are H1N1."

But the activity is very low, said Tom Skinner, a CDC spokesman, with most states reporting no or sporadic activity.

Even so, Skinner said "it still makes sense for people, especially high-risk people, to get vaccinated because H1N1 might circulate even at very low levels through the summer."

Also, people who travel to South America this summer should consider being vaccinated. As that continent enters winter, the swine flu virus will be circulating there, officials said.

Lee has 700 vaccination doses in stock but can get more, James-Mesloh said.

While doctors believe the virus is spread mainly through droplets in the air, all should heed last year's instructions to thwart the spread of the illness through good health hygiene, experts said. That includes washing hands for at least 20 seconds, covering coughs and staying home from work or school if infected.

- Staff writer Thomas Stewart contributed to this report.