

Three more Utah deaths linked to H1N1 swine flu

Prevention » With vaccine in short supply, officials urge handwashing and other tactics

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The H1N1 swine flu virus claimed the lives of three Utah women over the last week, as the flu season gets off to a rare early start.

For two weeks in a row, the percentage of visits to Utah clinics for influenza-like illness has hovered around 3 percent -- well above what is considered outbreak level, said Tom Hudachko, a spokesman for the Utah Department of Health.

"It's actually considered very unusual for this time of year. These are levels we would see much later in the flu season," he said, not the second week of October.

And with many Utahns not yet qualifying for the limited H1N1 vaccine doses in the state, officials are urging residents to do what they can to slow the spread -- from handwashing to stocking up for a stay at home.

The three Utahns who died were a Salt Lake County woman over the age of 65, a Utah County woman between 18 and 39 years old and a Weber County woman between 40 and 64 years old.

Both the women from Utah and Weber counties had underlying health conditions that put them at higher risk for flu complications, local health departments said.

Including the 18 deaths from the 2008-2009 flu season, which ended in late August, the state's total number of H1N1 deaths is 21.

Hudachko said another 41 people were hospitalized with flulike illness over the last week -- due to both H1N1 and seasonal strains of flu -- bringing the total to 127 for the new season.

"If you think of an outbreak occurring on a bell-shaped curve, we appear to be at the base of what could be a steep climb to the peak," said Rachel Herlihy, the department's deputy state epidemiologist, in a statement.

While there is a substantial increase in the spread of the pandemic H1N1 virus throughout the state, public health officials are urging Utahns to be patient, as the supply of H1N1 vaccine has trickled in slower than they anticipated. They do, however, expect to receive more in the coming weeks.

Some local health departments, which are distributing the H1N1 vaccine, have seen high demand. At the Weber-Morgan Health Department, officials have set limits on who qualifies for the limited vaccine and allocated 300 doses for distribution each day, hoping to stretch the current supply, said spokeswoman Lori Buttars.

On Wednesday, the day's doses were all spoken for in an hour, she said.

"The problem is we just don't have a lot of vaccine," she said. "We're fine-tuning this as we go along."

While some residents have been disappointed or frustrated that they don't qualify, or that doses are gone, "for giving them such bad news, they've handled it well," Buttars added.

Department officials are urging residents, vaccinated or not, to keep up with basic prevention measures, such as "social distancing" -- from keeping hands clean to cutting down on hugs, she added.

"The vaccine is only part of the equation," she said.

It's critical that Utahns take such proactive measures to protect themselves and others, including staying home if they get sick, Herlihy agreed.

The state health department also is tracking overall absenteeism in Utah schools, based on the number of children out each day, per 100 students. That number has gone from about 2.7 per 100 students in September to about 4.8, Hudachko said.

Cleveland Elementary School in Emery County has closed for the rest of the week, after about half of its students called in sick Tuesday, many with flulike symptoms.

Granite and Jordan School Districts report no significant spikes in absenteeism. On Monday, Davis School District noticed a small bump, said Davis spokesman Christopher Williams.

"But the following day, the same number of students who were absent came back to school, so we're thinking maybe it had something to do with Columbus Day," he said.

At least one elementary school in Park City reports more kids and teachers calling in sick, said district spokesman Pat Ogden. "But it's nowhere near severe enough to consider closing the school."

Tribune staffers Kirsten Stewart and Sheila R. McCann contributed to this report.

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Prevention tips

Since not all Utahns qualify to be vaccinated against H1N1 flu immediately, state health officials urge these steps to prevent its spread:

- » Wash your hands regularly, especially after sneezing or coughing, using soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizers.
- » Cough or sneeze into a tissue or your shirt sleeve.
- » Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth, which spreads germs.
- » Avoid close contact with sick people.
- » Stay home from work or school when you have an influenza-like illness, for at least 24 hours after your fever has broken. Prepare to stay home now by gathering supplies, such as food, water, tissues, sanitizers and medications.

For more information, visit www.health.utah.gov/h1n1.

Getting vaccinated

H1N1 flu vaccine is being distributed by Utah's 12 local health departments. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has licensed four manufacturers to produce the vaccine, and each manufacturer produces vaccine that is only approved for use in certain age groups.

Since it remains in short supply, local departments are setting limits on who qualifies for these initial doses.

- » To see a map of the state's departments and their plans, visit www.sltrib.com/fluinfo.
- » For more information about vaccine availability, call 2-1-1 or visit www.immunize-utah.org.

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