

Health department prepares for H1N1 flu

by Carol Crump

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Flu season starts at about the same time the kids are headed back to school. This year, fall also will be the time that a second wave of H1N1 flu hits.

"It's not if, but when and how tough," said Casper-Natrona County Health Department Director Bob Harrington.

The Casper-Natrona County Health Department, along with Natrona County Emergency Management and the Natrona County School District, are working out the details of what to do to protect the community when the double whammy flu hits.

During the average seasonal flu period that happens every year from October to February or March, 5 to 20 percent of the U.S. population gets the virus.

If the annual virus takes its usual toll, more than 200,000 will be hospitalized and about 36,000 will die from seasonal flu-related complications.

Since H1N1 emerged last spring, the new virus has spread to 168 countries, with approximately 162,000 cases and about 1,154 deaths. In the U.S., 436 people have died from what was initially called swine flu because of its similarity to influenza viruses that occur in North American pigs.

So far, Wyoming has had 100 cases, with no deaths. Four cases have been confirmed in Natrona County.

The seasonal flu and H1N1 flu are different viruses, even though the symptoms are similar. Both cause fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headaches, chills and fatigue, and in some cases diarrhea and vomiting. Both are contagious and spread from human to human.

The differences between seasonal flu and H1N1 could be severity and the population that is most likely at risk. In seasonal flu, those at higher risk of serious flu-related complications are people 65 and older, children, pregnant women and people with serious medical conditions.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, H1N1 may be different. About one-third of adults older than 60 may have antibodies against the virus, and most of the confirmed cases have been in people between the ages of 5 and 24.

Clinical trials are underway to help the CDC learn about the severity of the flu, how it impacts different age groups and how it will interact with seasonal flu.

Locally, county health meets weekly with its community partners to update the pandemic flu preparedness plan. The new school year will be the impetus for a countywide education program that will send educational information about flu with school children.

"For now, it's mostly educational," said county health's special operations manager, Audrey Gray.

The good news about the onset of the viruses is that there will be preventive vaccines available for both seasonal and H1N1 flu. The federal government has contracted with four manufacturers to produce the vaccine for H1N1.

"When the vaccine is available, plan on getting it as part of prevention," suggested county health's director of disease prevention, Tia Hansuld.

The department's first clinic for seasonal flu shots will be in October, and planning is underway for the most effective way to distribute the H1N1 vaccine.

New guidelines and recommendations are being released weekly by the CDC, but the expectation is that H1N1 vaccine will be administered separately from seasonal flu vaccine.

The message from the local health department for both types of flu is prevention. The antivirals like Tamiflu that are available help relieve symptoms if they are started within the first 24 hours.

Most individuals with the real flu are too ill to get to a doctor within the crucial time for what Hansuld has heard described as “the worst you will ever feel in your entire life.”

The health department also discourages using antivirals because the flu can become resistant to the medication.

“It’s best to get a flu shot; don’t expect antivirals to fix it,” Hansuld said. “It’s prevention. Wash your hands, cover your cough, get a flu shot, stay home when you’re sick.”

Sidebar:

H1N1 flu facts from the Casper-Natrona County Health Department

Help prevent spreading the disease by:

- Covering your cough
- Staying home if ill
- Washing hands often

Seek medical attention if symptoms seem severe:

- * Temperature above 102 degrees F.
- * Severe respiratory symptoms
- * Severe aches/pains
- * Severe tiredness/fatigue

For more information, visit www.cdc.gov, www.health.wyo.gov or call the Casper-Natrona Health Department, 235-9340, option 5.