

The Swine Flu Pandemic

by Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks, May 2009

As a result of the outbreak of Swine Flu in Mexico, our County's Public Health Department Director activated the Department's Operations Center on Friday, April 24th. The Center coordinates information, medical response, emergency plans and the dissemination of public information county-wide. It's been 41 years since the last human influenza pandemic, and it is the first time many of us have dealt with a pandemic.

A pandemic is differentiated from an epidemic by the wide geographical area and large number of individuals affected. During the last century, the world experienced three major human influenza pandemics: the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 that caused an estimated 45 million deaths worldwide, the 1957 pandemic known as the Asian flu that killed close to 2 million people globally, and more recently, in 1968, the Hong Kong flu was estimated to have killed about 1 million people.

Swine Flu normally doesn't infect humans, although when those cases do occur, they are most commonly among persons with direct exposure to pigs. With this current outbreak of Swine Flu, A (H1N1), the new virus appears to be a combination of segments of multiple viruses, containing swine, avian, and human virus segments. An animal influenza virus that circulates among domesticated or wild animals that becomes transmissible to humans is a potential pandemic threat. When the virus is transmissible from human-to-human, the threat increases, and it is considered a pandemic when the human-to-human infection occurs on a wide scale among different populations.

Like all large-scale emergencies, we have to take individual responsibility to protect ourselves and others. While we are still in the early stages of determining the magnitude and severity of Swine Flu, we can reduce the spread of infection by practicing heightened levels of hygiene and staying home if signs of flu are present.

In response to this outbreak, our County has ramped up locally in conjunction with State, national and international efforts by the World Health Organization in preparation for a full scale pandemic. Being prepared for the worst, even if it turns out to be mild, is a good exercise for future preparedness as well as giving us the greatest ability to respond to what is currently an unknown level of severity for this particular virus.

To determine the severity of the Swine Flu virus, health professionals look to the numbers of deaths attributable to the disease. They look at the context of the deaths and hospitalizations of Swine Flu victims, for example if those who died had pre-existing illnesses. They must determine if the initial deaths are the tip of the iceberg or the iceberg itself, something that, for the most part, only time will tell. Another consideration is the proportion of people who become infected. For example, are we dealing with large numbers of people who are infected but symptom-free, or are only those with symptoms infected?

As of April 28th, the Public Health Department has tested 36 specimens, including from people who have been back and forth to Mexico, and none have tested positive for Swine Flu. The Public Health Department has been informing physicians how to test, and encouraging the medical community to test any patient who has symptoms. With aggressive outreach, and an informed public we expect to see a growing number of specimens submitted from physicians for testing. Hopefully those tests will continue to be negative. Over the next two to three weeks we'll have a better understanding of how virulent the virus is, and hopefully it is no more virulent than a common cold.

County health officials have been in close communication with clinics and hospitals and we stand prepared to assist those who are ill, regardless of their ability to pay. In the event the virus becomes severe, the State has provided the County with thousands of courses of Tamaflu and plans are in place to respond to all levels of severity. We can go to heightened steps of response that include "social distancing" by closing schools, theaters, and other congregations of people.

Symptoms of Swine Flu A (H1N1) are similar to those of seasonal influenza: fever or chills, headache, nasal congestion or runny nose, sore throat, cough, body aches or lethargy, lack of appetite, nausea, vomiting, and/or diarrhea.

While government has a significant role to play in reducing the spread of disease, individual responsibility is key. General recommendations are to practice good respiratory hygiene by coughing or sneezing into a tissue, washing your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water, staying home from work and school if you are sick to avoid spreading illness, wearing a mask if you have symptoms and must be with others. Seek medical care if you have a cough or sore throat and a fever of 100 degrees or more, especially if you have had contact with someone who has developed symptoms within seven days after returning from a location where Swine Flu has been reported. Your health matters, and in cases of highly infectious diseases, we all need to care and practice heightened levels of prevention.