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Flu cases spike in parts of Missouri
Three outbreaks also reported in Missouri schools

The number of flu-like illnesses treated in Missouri hospital emergency rooms spiked in the last week to about twice the normal rate, prompting a warning from state health officials.

“It’s too early to know whether this is a trend,” said Margaret Donnelly, Missouri’s top health official. “But it indicates that the new H1N1 flu virus is circulating in our communities and people need to take action. Any places people gather – schools, offices, factories, government offices – need to plan now to help limit the spread of flu.”

The number of flu-like cases reported by Missouri hospitals jumped from to nearly 4 percent of all illnesses the hospitals handled in the last several days, up from less than 2 percent on a typical days. The spike was especially pronounced in southeast Missouri, where nearly 14 percent – or one of every seven persons treated – reported flu-like symptoms.

The Northwest region, which includes Kansas City and St. Joseph, also reported a sudden increase in flu-like illness. The increase in the Northwest was to a more modest 4 percent of cases, but is considered significant because of the much larger population base.

Donnelly, director of the Department of Health and Senior Services, said the increase was notable because it coincides with the beginning of school and the resumption of classes at colleges and universities. Younger people have been especially vulnerable to the new H1N1 flu virus, which has become the dominant flu virus throughout the world.

Statewide, 47 percent of the cases of flu-like illnesses treated in hospital emergency rooms were among children 5 to 17 years old. In the Northwest region, 60 percent of the flu-like cases were in that age group.

In addition, two schools in Ripley County and one in Cole County have reported outbreaks of flu-like illness. Several universities have experienced bouts with the flu.

So far, most cases of H1N1 flu have been relatively mild and most people recover in a few days without medical treatment. But the virus can cause serious illness, especially among pregnant women, young children and anyone with a weakened immune system.

Donnelly said the spike in flu-like illness underscores the need for everyone to take basic steps to protect themselves from this virus. These are the simple, and most effective, ways of limiting the spread of flu:

- Use proper hand washing techniques. Wash hands frequently, especially before and after eating and after using the bathroom. If soap and water are not available, alcohol-based hand cleaners containing at least 60 percent alcohol are also effective.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue or the inside of your elbow – not your bare hands. Flu primarily spreads from person to person through the droplets produced by coughs and sneezes.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Stay home when you are sick, especially if you have a fever. Remain at home until at least 24 hours after your fever is gone. If you need to take medicine such as Tylenol or Advil to bring down your fever, you need to stay home.
- If you are caring for a person with the flu, try to isolate the person away from others. Try to maintain a distance of at least three to six feet to keep from inhaling the virus produced when the person coughs.
- Get a seasonal flu shot now. The following groups of people should also plan to receive a vaccination for the H1N1 flu when that vaccine becomes available next month:
 - Pregnant women
 - Household contacts and caregivers for children younger than 6 months of age
 - Health care and emergency medical services personnel
 - All people from 6 months through 24 years of age
 - Persons aged 25 through 64 years who have health conditions associated with higher risk of medical complications from influenza.

Donnelly said schools and employers need to be vigilant as we enter the fall and winter months, which traditionally experience the largest number of flu cases.

“During cold weather, we become much more of an in-door society,” Donnelly said. “This leads to closer contact and more opportunities for the virus to spread.”

Schools, universities and employers should clean items that people often touch, such as desks, door knobs, computer keyboards and other hard surfaces. Use normal cleaning agents. No special cleaners are necessary.

If schools have a flu outbreak, staff should develop ways to increase the distance between students. Try moving desks further apart. Or move classes to larger spaces to allow more space between students.

Staff should develop options for ways that school work can be continued at home. This could happen if school is dismissed, if students have an underlying medical problem or they have a sick family member. Such options might include homework packets and Web-based lessons.

For a wide range of information on the H1N1 virus and how to avoid it, check out the Health and Senior Services Web site at http://www.dhss.mo.gov/BT_Response/H1N1Flu.html. The site includes specific guidance written in everyday language for a long list of specialized groups.