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Missouri Health Officials continue making plans to limit spread of swine flu

The World Health Organization's declaration Thursday that the new H1N1 flu virus is a global pandemic is not a surprise to Missouri public health officials who are already preparing for next year's flu season.

"This declaration was merely the confirmation of what public health officials already knew: The new H1N1 virus can move from person-to-person and has now spread throughout the world," said Margaret Donnelly, director of the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services. "Fortunately, this flu has been no more severe than the common seasonal flu that we face each year."

Donnelly said the goal since the virus arrived in Missouri in late April has been to limit its spread. But the H1N1 virus, commonly referred to as swine flu, is now spreading rapidly in the southern hemisphere, where flu season is under way. In Australia and Chile, health officials have found that the new virus is becoming the dominant type of flu, crowding out more traditional viruses.

Health officials see that development as a precursor to the next flu season in North America, which begins Oct. 1. Therefore, Missouri's state and local health departments are using the summer to plan for dealing with and controlling outbreaks of this new flu strain next season.

Donnelly said the decision by the WHO to declare a pandemic did not cause health officials to change their strategy in dealing with the bug. The declaration was based on current WHO standards, which consider only the geographic spread of the H1N1 virus, not any change in the severity of the illness it causes. The declaration was official recognition that the virus has now been confirmed in more than 70 countries and can be assumed to exist worldwide, she said.

"No matter what the World Health Organization calls this, Missouri health officials have been taking aggressive steps to protect the health of our residents," Donnelly said. "At this point, we have no reason to believe that this virus is more dangerous than the seasonal flu. But we need to be prepared in case it does become a more significant problem."

In May, state health officials distributed enough anti-viral medication to local health departments to treat more than 600,000 cases of flu. Health care providers will be alerted to be on the lookout for flu-like illness. Federal officials are working with pharmaceutical companies to develop a vaccine against this new strain of flu.

In Missouri, the flu is a problem every year. The seasonal flu caused 11,137 illnesses in Missouri from October through May, compared with an average of about 15,000 cases each year. In contrast, the H1N1 virus has been confirmed in only 50 cases in Missouri and nearly all have produced mild symptoms. But the virus has been linked to at least 27 deaths nationwide, including one in Missouri.

The best way the public can protect themselves from the new virus is to practice good hygiene. People need to cover the nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. They should wash their hands often with soap and water, especially after coughing. They should avoid touching their eyes, nose or mouth and avoid close contact with sick people. People who come down with the flu should stay home from work or school to avoid spreading the virus to others.

Donnelly said state officials are working closely with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and with local health departments to keep the new virus in check.

"We learn more about this virus and its impact on human health every day," Donnelly said. "As we learn, we will adjust our response and inform the public. In short, we will do all we can to make this outbreak less severe."

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