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District deals with first flu case

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Posted: Friday, May 8, 2009 12:00 am

Melissa Flores | 0 comments

Health officials urge caution to prevent further infections

San Benito County Public Health staff reported Tuesday the first probable case of A (H1N1) in San Benito just as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a statement that it no longer recommends school closures for schools that have identified cases of the illness.

"The case is still probable and we are 99 percent sure at this point, but it needs to go through the final steps at CDC to culture it out and give us confirmation," said Samela Perez, the public information officer for the San Benito County Health and Human Services Agency's Public Health Services, in a press statement.

District deals with first flu case

SPECIAL TO THE PINNACLE Samela Perez, right, the public information officer for the Public Health Department, goes over information on how to prevent the spread of the flu with a business owner.

The infected person is a student in the Hollister School District who has been home from school. Public health officials and district staff have not revealed the child's identity. Staff at the school and family members are being interviewed by public health officials to see if anyone else has signs or symptoms of the illness.

"We are following the CDC's recommendation not to close schools if there is one student identified with a confirmed case," Perez wrote in a press statement. "Because H1N1 flu appears to be less severe than initially feared, we believe that school closures are no longer necessary. However, we continue to stress the importance that anyone who is sick stay home."

Hollister School District Superintendent Ron Crates sent a message by auto dial to families of HSD students Tuesday evening to notify them of the case and to let them know that schools would not be closed.

"We are really pleased with the cooperation from [Public] Health," Crates said. "We had several meetings, went over protocols again."

The median age of those who have been confirmed with H1N1 is 16 years, but Perez stressed that all people are urged to continue practicing universal precautions such as washing hands. Populations that should be especially cautious are the very young, the elderly, pregnant women and those with compromised immune systems, she said.

On Wednesday, Crates said 92 percent of students and 100 percent of staff showed up to the school, average attendance rates.

The number of cases worldwide continues to climb. More than 1,516 cases in 22 countries had been confirmed by May 6, and though some reports from Mexico have indicated that the number of cases may be slowing, World Health Organization officials and staff from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, were still urging caution at press time. WHO has kept the pandemic alert level at 5, a phase that indicates that cases have been confirmed in multiple countries and that a pandemic is inevitable.

"We really need to be cautious when a virus jumps from animal to human and then spreads easily from human to human," Perez said.

Cases in the United States rose to 642, with another death reported in Texas, bringing the total U.S. fatalities to two. The flu had been

confirmed in 41 states Wednesday, at press time.

"Everyday, we call each school and we haven't seen any aberrations, or more absences," Perez said. "We are monitoring and we are doing outreach as much as possible."

Part of the local outreach included meeting with business owners to talk about what they could do to curb the spread of illnesses such as H1N1 and to request that they put up signs about it.

"The universal precautions, although they are super simple, are also extremely effective," Perez said. "We are, of course, promoting washing hands and keeping children home if they are sick."

Public health staff got in contact with local churches to help get the word out. Some churches changed their services to stop potential spread of illness, such as St. Benedict Sacred Heart, where church officials opted not to serve the wine during communion.

"Our role is surveillance and monitoring," Perez said, "and to be cautious and put actions into place when needed."

Staff also met with local superintendents and school principals who quickly took action to prevent possible infections, and discussed policies and procedures if a case of H1N1 were to be confirmed in a student.

"People coming back from Mexico are advised to stay home for five to seven days before they return to work or school," Perez said.

Rachel Flores-Zepeda, a Spanish teacher at San Benito High School and Club Ed adviser, took a group of students to Mexico over spring break. The students, who stayed an hour south of Cancun, did spend time in the airport April 17. Flores-Zepeda said she did not worry when reports emerged a few weeks later about the flu outbreak.

"I was not [worried] because I knew a lot of the students got together a week later," she said. "I have seen several of the kids and no one got ill. I think we just missed it."

She has seen an increase in her students using antibacterial wipes or hand sanitizer in her classroom since news of the outbreak, she said.

"Each teacher received a tub of hand sanitizer, and the students are a lot more cautious," she said.

Hollister School District officials also sent letters home to parents, and spent \$6,000 on health supplies such as hand sanitizer and disinfectant. Each principal took a basket of supplies back to the schools after a meeting with health officials last week.

"We are taking our lead from the health department," Crates said.

Though the CDC has changed their recommendation on school closures, the order to close a school would come down from the county's health officer, Elizabeth Falade, or from Jack O'Connell, the state superintendent of schools. If schools close under those circumstances, they would receive their full funding for average daily attendance from the state. The CDC now recommends closure only if student or staff absences interfere with the school's ability to operate, according to a press release from the local public health department.

"The main precautions we are taking have to do with working with the county and state health officials," said Stan Rose, the San Benito High School superintendent. "We really answer to state and local [health officials] and receive information through County Health."

At the high school, maintenance workers distributed hand sanitizer and anti-bacterial wipes to all the classrooms.

"That is the best thing you can do," Rose said. "The best thing you can do is try to keep your hands clean."

The high school staff sent a message home to parents and Rose said officials would continue to be in contact with them.

"People wonder if it is going to fizzle out – which way is it going? – but we are erring on the side of caution for the health and safety of our community," Perez said.

Resources:

Anyone with questions on H1N1 can call the hotline set up by the California Department of Public Health at 1-888-865-0564. It is open Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., and weekends from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

California Department of Public Health – ww2.cdph.ca.gov

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – www.cdc.gov

World Health Organization – www.who.int

Flu fact and fiction

What are the symptoms of H1N1?

Early signs are flu-like, including fever, cough, headache, muscle and joint pain, sore throat and runny nose, and sometimes vomiting or diarrhea.

What is the difference between seasonal and pandemic flu?

Seasonal epidemics occur every year and often there is a vaccination available to treat it. A pandemic is a worldwide epidemic of a new virus to which people have no immunity and a vaccination is not yet available.

What is the difference between a probable and confirmed case?

A probable case is one that shows the symptoms of influenza that tests positive for type A influenza or is considered linked to another probable

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of confirmed case. A confirmed case is one that tests positive in a laboratory for the influenza A (H1N1) virus.

Is a vaccination available for H1N1?

A vaccine is not ready, but work is under way to develop one. Making a completely new influenza vaccine takes five to six months and needs to be developed from a dead or weakened form of the virus.

Is it safe to travel?

Travel restrictions have not been recommended by the World Health Organization, though it has recommended that those who are ill delay travel plans and those returning from international travel who show signs of illness should seek appropriate medical care.

Is it safe to eat pork and pork products?

The influenza A (H1N1) virus has not been shown to spread to people from eating properly handled and prepared pork. It is killed at a cooking temperature of 160 degrees F.

Should people wear masks?

Those who are not sick do not need to wear a mask, but those who are caring for a sick person should wear a mask.

How do we prevent the spread of illness?

- avoid close contact with people who appear unwell and have fever and cough;
- wash your hands with soap and water thoroughly and often;
- practice good health habits including adequate sleep, eating nutritious food, and keeping physically active

Information from the World Health Organization, the CDC and the California Department of Public Health

Confirmed cases

Mexico: 822 cases, 29 deaths

United States: 642 cases, 2 death

Austria: 1

Canada: 165

China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region: 1

Colombia: 1

Costa Rica: 1

Denmark: 1

El Salvador: 2

France: 4

Germany: 9

Guatemala: 1

Ireland: 1

Israel: 4

Italy: 5

Netherlands: 1

New Zealand: 6

Portugal: 1

Republic of Korea: 2

Spain: 57

Switzerland: 1

United Kingdom: 27

According to the WHO and CDC as of May 6.



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Melissa Flores City Editor



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