

By Dave Vrbas

The Wauneta Breeze

The H1N1 virus has officially hit the area.

With two confirmed cases of influenza A subtype H1N1 reported in Wauneta within the past week—resulting from lab tests on a 22-year-old man and six-year-old boy from the same family—area residents are being reminded to take precautions to protect themselves from this year's flu pandemic.

On Sunday, Sept. 27, the 22-year-old was flown by Flight for Life from the Chase County Community Hospital (CCCH), where he was suffering from pneumonia-like symptoms, to the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha. There, he was placed on a ventilator in the intensive care unit.

The man was diagnosed with the H1N1 strain of influenza, formerly referred to as "swine flu," at the Omaha hospital. Listed in stable condition earlier this week, he was expected to be released Tuesday for a return to his home.

The six-year-old, a student at Wauneta-Palisade Public Schools, was later officially diagnosed with the virus, but family members say his bout was far less severe than that of the older family member.

Family members were willing to confirm the diagnosis of H1N1 virus infection, but for privacy purposes, have asked that their names not be released for publication.

The WP school sent out a letter to parents and guardians of district students on Thursday, Oct. 1, explaining that a student was diagnosed with a confirmed case of H1N1 influenza and detailing steps parents could take to protect their children from contracting the virus or spreading it further.

Of those steps, the school stressed taking your child's temperature each morning before school, remaining watchful of flu-like symptoms and allowing them to stay home from school when symptoms present themselves.

Wauneta-Palisade Supt. Nelson Dahl said the school has been and will remain very understanding about the flu season as it pertains to attendance.

The most important thing, he said, is communicating with the school regarding your child's symptoms.

"We don't want people to feel like they have to come to school if they don't feel good," Dahl said. "If you choose to keep your youngster home, it will be excused as long as we know what's going on."

The nasal mist H1N1 vaccine began arriving in small quantities in Nebraska on Monday. State health officials said they expect at least 10,000 doses of the nasal spray vaccine to be delivered to Nebraska by the end of the week.

The nasal spray contains a live virus and healthcare providers in the area will decide whether to administer that vaccine arriving now or the inactive virus, which is an injectable vaccine, to each patient.

Lola Jones, CEO at CCCH, said the nasal mist vaccine will probably not be used by the hospital or its satellite clinics, as it is not appropriate, nor is it safe, for most patients because of the live virus.

Jones said she hopes that the injectable vaccine will be arriving soon, but can't count on it since they've run out of regular flu shots and don't know for sure when they'll be arriving.

Once it arrives, the H1N1 vaccine will be available at the Chase County Clinic and their satellite clinic in Wauneta.

Myra Stoney, director of the Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department in McCook, said the area should be just fine in regards to the vaccine.

“There should be more than enough to go around,” Stoney said.

Stoney explained that healthcare providers will administer the vaccine—in its inactive virus form—to priority groups first: pregnant women, healthcare providers and emergency services personnel, caregivers for infants younger than six months, children from six months to 24 years of age, and those with underlying medical conditions.

The vaccine will be made available to anyone who wants it, and the decision to get vaccinated is up to each individual. The regular flu shot is ineffective against H1N1, and vice versa.

As of Sept. 27, more than 340,000 laboratory confirmed cases of H1N1 have been confirmed worldwide, and more than 4,100 deaths due to the virus have also been reported to the World Health Organization (WHO). Three of those deaths were in Nebraska.

According to the WHO’s website, the number of confirmed cases is likely much higher than those statistics due to many countries not reporting individual cases, especially the milder ones.

The H1N1 flu virus was originally referred to as “swine flu” because laboratory testing showed many of the virus’ genes were similar to viruses that occur in pigs in North America.

Further studies have shown that this new virus is very different from what normally circulates in pigs. Transmission of the virus is human to human and eating cooked pork products will not transmit the virus.

H1N1 influenza cases range in severity and are often accompanied by the following symptoms: fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, fatigue, diarrhea and vomiting.

If you think you have the virus, a trip to the doctor and a simple laboratory test can confirm whether or not you’re hit with that virus, influenza or a common cold.

Experts recommend sneezing into a tissue and immediately disposing of it, washing hands thoroughly and regularly, as well as avoiding contact with sick people to prevent exposure to the virus.