

By Carolyn Lee

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It's been just over a month since Nebraska began preparing for the novel influenza A (H1N1), also known as swine flue.

Activities are ongoing, according to the state's Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Joann Schaefer, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

"Like I said at the beginning when this virus appeared, we will know much more how this virus will affect us in one to two months," Dr. Schaefer said.

HHS has alerted physicians to be on the watch for the virus. An emergency response plan was activated, and the Lt. Governor's Homeland Security group began meeting.

On April 29, the first case in the state was reported as a probable case, and it was confirmed.

As of May 26 there were 35 confirmed cases in Nebraska from 11 counties. The median age of people affected is 12 in Nebraska.

Local health departments have continually worked with DHHS to contact physicians, track contacts and recommend antivirals.

Hospitals have been reporting the number of cases of influenza-like illness that have been hospitalized. Enhanced and extended influenza testing is uncovering seasonal flu cases as well as H1N1. Usually the seasonal flu season is monitored until May 2. Evidence of cases this late in the year is unusual, according to DHHS. About 50 percent of test results indicate H1N1.

Dr. Jonathan Richman, Chief Medical Officer at Chase County Community Hospital, said CCCH hasn't had any H1N1 cases. However, he just attended a national conference spotlighting the flu.

Dr. Richman said experts are concerned that H1N1 might hit stronger in the fall, just as it did in 1918.

"There doesn't seem to be a peak in the season," he said. "It's behaving in an unusual fashion. It's a new virus and people don't have immunity."

Dr. Richman said 56 percent of those cases confirmed are between the ages of five and 24. "It doesn't seem to affect people over age 62," he added.

If personnel at CCCH see anyone with influenza-like symptoms, they take a swab sample. "If it comes up positive A we send it to the state for further testing," he said.

Symptoms can include a fever of greater than 100 degrees, a sore throat, body aches and coughing. Diarrhea and vomiting can also be symptoms.

A doctor should be consulted, as he or she can prescribe an antiviral to ease the symptoms and possibly shorten the duration of the illness.

DHHS also advises the public to stay home from work or school to avoid spreading the virus; avoid close contact with people who are coughing or otherwise appear ill; avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth; cover mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing; and wash hands frequently.

Dr. Richman said scientists are still working on a vaccine for H1N1. When it becomes available, he recommends that people get a vaccination.