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Local medical facility prepares for H1N1 flu

Planning for the worst, hoping for the best

By Amy Chaffins
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In the event of a major flu outbreak, local medical facilities are making plans to be ready for the worst.

Health care facility officials are particularly concerned about the potential spread of H1N1 novel influenza.

H1N1 novel influenza is a respiratory illness caused by a virus - it is different from seasonal influenza. The signs and symptoms of H1N1 novel influenza are similar to seasonal flu, including: Fever (above 100°F), cough, sore throat, stuffy nose and in some cases diarrhea and vomiting.

H1N1 influenza is spread when a person with flu coughs or sneezes, or by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.

Last spring's outbreak of H1N1 novel influenza across the country prompted local health care officials to begin meeting and planning for the threat of widespread infection this fall.

GRHS's internal planning

A committee at Glacial Ridge Health System has met for several months detailing a plan on how to handle widespread employee absences.

Jeanette Pasche, RN and Emergency Department Manager, is a committee member and she said each department in the health system has a contingency plan on how to operate with minimum staff.

In addition, all GRHS staff received seasonal flu vaccinations earlier this month. Pasche said, "We don't want anyone to get the seasonal flu if we can help it." Employees home sick with seasonal flu would likely compound absences during an H1N1 outbreak.

Health care workers who work directly with patients will receive H1N1 immunizations later this fall, once the vaccination is available.

Individual GRHS departments have reportedly started monitoring for employee illness and GRHS employees who do not come in contact with patients - like medical records or information technology personnel - are using a non-public entrance to limit their potential exposure to the flu virus.

Greg Meyers, Director of Emergency Services for Glacial Ridge Health System, said, "We know it's out there, people will get sick - it's inevitable. We're trying to limit the number of people who will be out when [flu season] peaks."

GRHS has also reportedly started cross-training employees to potentially cover for employees who may be out sick.

Meyers said, worst case scenario, they're preparing for an overload of the local health care system. "We're a health care facility - people expect us to be open and operating," he said.

So far, Meyers said there hasn't been a strain on the local health system, but they are preparing for the worst and the level of awareness is there among GRHS employees.

Plans for patients

Before going to the clinic or emergency room, local health care officials are strongly encouraging the public to call ahead.

"If people call ahead, they can be screened to de-

termine if they need to come in," Pasche said. "We want to make sure we're prepared for them."

Already, GRHS has hand sanitizing stations and face masks set up at the facility's entrances.

Anyone with influenza-like illness is asked to wear a mask upon entering the building. Plus, those people are also asked to use a separate waiting area designated for those with influenza-like illness.

"We are sensitive to those people who may feel singled out wearing a mask," Pasche said, "but wearing a mask is the best way to reduce exposure to other people."

Pasche said an individual can spread the flu even before developing symptoms. A person starts shedding the virus about 24 hours before starting to feel ill. This is one reason that prevention by vaccination is so important, she said.

Everyone entering and exiting the facility is encouraged to use the waterless hand sanitizer.

If there is a widespread outbreak of H1N1 flu, GRHS officials have also discussed the possibility of curtailing or canceling visiting hours and limiting access to the facility.

Advice to the community

First, health officials are encouraging the public to get their seasonal flu vaccination. Clinics will be set up for the public in a few weeks - watch the *Tribune* for details.

The H1N1 flu vaccination is expected to be available later this fall. When it's initially distributed, priority groups will receive the first vaccinations: children age five and younger, pregnant women, adults with chronic diseases and health care workers.

In the meantime, be vigilant about washing your hands, be sure to cough or sneeze into your sleeve and stay home if you're sick.

Local businesses are also encouraged to plan ahead if the majority of their staff becomes sick.

Facts about H1N1

According to the Minnesota Department of Health:

- In Minnesota, H1N1 novel influenza activity peaked during the third week of June.

- Low numbers of hospitalized cases of H1N1 novel influenza as well as seasonal influenza continue to be identified.

- Three deaths have been associated with H1N1 novel influenza infection.

- As of July 31, 2009, the median age of hospitalized cases is 12 years; most hospitalized cases (>80%) are residents of the 7-county Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area.

- Asthma is currently the most frequently identified chronic underlying health condition noted among patients hospitalized with H1N1 novel influenza.

- 78% of hospitalized patients with H1N1 novel influenza had at least one risk factor for severe complications from influenza.

- H1N1 novel influenza currently represents >90% of all influenza A positive samples tested at MDH.

- MDH currently tests hospitalized patients with influenza-like-illness (ILI), samples as part of potential clusters, individuals with ILI who have contact with pigs, and any death that may be associated with H1N1 novel influenza.

On Tuesday, the Pope County Preparedness Group will meet for a tabletop scenario of an H1N1 flu outbreak in Pope County. Representatives from several agencies across the county will participate.

Check out next week's *Tribune* for details about the group and tabletop practice session.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), you can take these everyday steps to protect your health:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.

- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread this way.

- Avoid close contact with sick people.

- Stay home if you are sick for seven days after your symptoms begin or until you have been symptom-free for 24 hours, whichever is longer. This is to keep from infecting others and spreading the virus further.

Other important actions that you can take are:

- Follow public health advice regarding school closures, avoiding crowds and other social distancing measures.

- Be prepared in case you get sick and need to stay home for a week or so; a supply of over-the-counter medicines, alcohol-based hand rubs, tissues and other related items could be useful and help avoid the need to make trips out in public while you are sick and contagious.

Overall, the best thing you can do now is to stay informed.