

Extra Feature Story

Swine Flu Sweeps Across Globe, Raising Fears of Flu Pandemic

April 28, 2009

A new strain of the swine flu, a disease in pigs that sometimes infects humans, has killed more than 150 people in Mexico and has spread to Europe, Asia and the United States.

At least 60 cases were confirmed in the United States in New York, Kansas, California, Ohio and Texas causing at least one death.

The swine flu is not new; it is a respiratory disease in pigs caused by the type A influenza virus that normally doesn't affect humans.

But by last week the virus had developed into a new highly infectious strain, a type known as the H1N1 flu virus that can pass person to person. Symptoms are similar to that of the seasonal flu: fever, cough, sore throat, and nausea and can range from mild to deadly.

Outbreak recalls 1918 Spanish Flu and 1976 Swine Flu

The most deadly flu outbreak in history was the influenza or Spanish Flu outbreak of 1918. Just after World War I the world wide pandemic killed 50 million people or about 1% of the global population and spread to all continents.

There was an outbreak of swine flu in 1976 that led to one death and an emergency prevention program that vaccinated approximately 40 million people, before complications with the vaccines provoked a public backlash.

The United Nations has warned that the current swine flu virus has the potential to become a pandemic-- an epidemic of infectious disease that spreads through populations across a large region.

But officials say the world is better prepared than ever to deal with the threat.

Homeland Security Chief Janet Napolitano told the NewsHour: "We have 50 million courses of Tamiflu and Relenza, which are two antivirals that have shown that they have some efficacy against this strain of swine flu."

Economic impact in Mexico

First detected in Mexico late last week, the government there has taken drastic measurements to curb the outbreak.

All schools are closed throughout Mexico until May 6th. Many other public gathering spaces have been closed indefinitely including churches in the heavily Catholic nation.

Mexico City, the national capital and a mega-city of almost 20 million people, has closed many public spaces like movie theaters, bars, and clubs and the federal government is considering shutting down to slow the spread of the disease.

The Mexican tourist economy, which had already suffered this year from escalating drug violence, has been further beaten down by the threat of swine flu. The United States and Europe are recommending that people avoid non-essential travel to Mexico.

New York School Affected by Trip to Mexico

Health officials have confirmed swine flu in at least 6 states and are watching for more.

An elementary school was closed in Elyria, Ohio, Monday when a sick 9-year-old student, who recently traveled to Mexico on a family vacation tested positive for the strain.

In possibly the largest outbreak in the United States, St. Francis Preparatory, a Catholic school in Queens, N.Y., was overwhelmed last week with over two dozen students testing positive for the swine flu. Several students became infected while travelling in Cancun, Mexico, for spring break and subsequently infected their peers at school.

"So to be on the safe side, not to have students in the building, not to have them in close contact with each other, we decided to close Monday and Tuesday" said Brother Leonard Conway, principal.

A 50-person private cleaning crew was working a 12-hour shift with sponges and buckets to sanitize the school.

"We want to make sure the bug has totally gone away," Conway added.

Just weeks before the outbreak, the Center for Disease Control had proclaimed that 2008-2009 had been a mild flu season because deaths and flu related hospitalization was substantially down this year.

-- Compiled by Lizzy Berryman for NewsHour Extra

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