

[metro]

Swine flu stalking the most vulnerable

Pregnant women and kids are at high risk.

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TAMPA » Jill Hechtman is getting used to the swine flu.

The obstetrician is used to her pregnant patients calling when they have flu-like symptoms: fever, sore throat, a bad cough. But this new strain of flu is hitting an already vulnerable population far more often and more seriously than bugs of years past.

"The patients are getting sicker," said Hechtman, who diagnosed two new swine flu cases this week.

Influenza, a respiratory infection, usually runs its course in a few days for most healthy people. But complications from the swine, or H1N1, strain appear to be particularly dangerous for pregnant women, young children and people suffering from respiratory conditions such as asthma, chronic bronchitis and emphysema.

Norman Edelman, chief medical officer for the American Lung Association, said seasonal flu always has been a serious concern for these particular groups. The difference is that swine flu is a new strain and scientists are still trying to get a handle on it.

"We don't know what kind of flu season we will have yet," he said.

Death toll rises

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Friday announced that swine flu was responsible for another 34 deaths last week, bringing the national total to 556. Those most recent deaths include five children, the CDC said, and at least one pregnant woman, a 22-year-old in Hillsborough County.

Five other Hillsborough adults who have died this year had underlying respiratory disease or conditions that affected their pulmonary system, Health Department spokesman Steve Huard said.

While pregnant women account for just 1 percent of the U.S. population, the group is responsible for 6 percent of swine-flu related hospitalizations and 6 percent of the deaths, the CDC has reported.

Hechtman, medical director of Tampa Obstetrics, said that's because pregnancy weakens the regular immune system, and a growing belly limits the lungs' capacity for deep breaths. Reduced pulmonary function means you're working harder to breathe and increasingly exhausted, adding to the risk, she said.

The key to staying well is avoiding crowds, where the flu spreads quickly; keeping your distance from sick co-workers and friends; and frequent hand-washing or sanitizing, Hechtman said.

"Everyone shouldn't have to put a mask on; but when you're walking around, make sure you are using Purell," she said.

People in high-risk groups should get treatment as soon as symptoms appear. Most cases are treated with antiviral drugs such as Tamiflu and Relenza.

"Call or get to your doctor as soon as possible," Hechtman said. "It's important to get the Tamiflu right away. It will reduce the symptoms and severity."

Children very vulnerable

Children are especially vulnerable because they're often carriers of a virus, said Juan Dumois, director of pediatric infectious diseases at All Children's Hospital in St. Petersburg. Children prone to respiratory infections need to be particularly cautious, as the swine flu hasn't seemed to wane the way the seasonal flu does in the summer.

Dumois said all but one of the patients he tested for influenza in the past four months had swine flu. That includes a 10-year-old boy who had two younger siblings at home, one with asthma. Dumois opted to treat those children with antiviral medicine, as they were at high risk of getting swine flu.

"At the time a decision is made to treat someone, the doctor should also be addressing other high-risk persons in the home," he said.

Chicago resident Pam Senger was on vacation in St. Petersburg when her 4-year-old daughter couldn't stop coughing or shake a fever. She suspected the girl, Rori Lynch, had swine flu, because she suf-

fered from a round of respiratory infections last winter. She was diagnosed with pneumonia, but the experience of spending three days in the hospital has convinced the mom to get her daughter all possible flu vaccinations when they are available.

She doesn't want to chance Rori getting sick again.

"Now I'm more worried she's even more at risk for it," she said.

Those at high risk and people who come into contact with them are among the priority groups for the first round of swine flu vaccinations, expected to be available by about mid-October. That includes parents and caretakers of children younger than 6 months, health care workers and adults ages 25 to 64, with underlying medical conditions. Anne Schuchat, director of the CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respi-



Tribune photo by JAY CONNER

Physician Jill Hechtman, checking Karen D'agostino, says people can stave off infection by avoiding crowds, sick co-workers and friends, and frequently washing their hands.

ratory Diseases, said that should address nearly half the nation's population.

She said the high risk-groups as well as the elderly should get vaccinated as soon as possible for seasonal flu. Seasonal flu shots will be widely avail-

able in the next few weeks.

The Lung Association's Edelman said that while more people are aware of the swine flu and its risks, he is worried the public will not heed warnings that people need vaccinations for both it and the

seasonal flu. Seasonal flu is responsible for an estimated 36,000 deaths nationwide every year.

"I would be double cautious," he said.

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