

Pandemic Flu Could Sicken One-Third of Global Population

GENEVA, Switzerland, May 7, 2009 (ENS) - The new influenza A/H1N1 could infect a third of the world's population, a top World Health Organization official said today.

At the agency's daily update in Geneva, WHO Assistant Director-General Keiji Fukuda told reporters on a teleconference, "If the outbreak were to hit pandemic proportions, it would be reasonable to estimate a third of the world's population would be infected."

The world's population now stands at 6.778 billion, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's World Population Clock, which means that if one-third of the population were infected today, 2.259 billion people would be sick.

But Fukuda said it is too early to tell how many of those affected by an H1N1 pandemic would die. "You can't make those projections until you see what proportion of the population gets seriously sick, what proportion of ill people die. Our understanding is evolving, it's very premature to make those projections," he said.



Mexico City lovers kiss through surgical masks worn to prevent flu transmission.
(Photo by [Erin Williamson](#))

Fukuda said that today the World Health Organization is leaving its international pandemic alert at phase 5, on a six-level warning scale, because the disease is still spreading in just one region - North America.

According to WHO data, the number of laboratory confirmed cases today rose to 2,371 in 24 countries, with 44 deaths.

Mexico still has the widest outbreak, confirming 1,112 cases and 42 deaths.

The following countries have reported laboratory confirmed cases with no deaths - Austria (1), Canada (201), China, Hong Kong (1), Colombia (1), Costa Rica (1), Denmark (1), El Salvador (2), France (5), Germany (10), Guatemala (1), Ireland (1), Israel (6), Italy (5), Netherlands (2), New Zealand (5), Poland (1), Portugal (1), South Korea (3), Spain (81), Sweden (1), Switzerland (1) and the United Kingdom (32).

There is no evidence that the virus is gaining a foothold and spreading through communities in the UK or Spain, which have maintained the status quo over the last few days, Fukuda

said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States today reported 1,823 probable and confirmed cases in 44 states with two deaths, an increase of around 330 cases over yesterday.

"We are reporting 896 confirmed cases in 43 states, that's an increase of 254 cases and around 925 probable cases," said Dr. Richard Besser, acting director of the CDC. "Again, I want to reiterate that as soon as I say the numbers, they're wrong because ongoing testing is taking place at CDC, it takes place in every state," he told reporters on a briefing call.

"Median age remains 15. The range is one month to 87 years and 12 of the cases are under age one," said Dr. Besser. "So I do want to remind you that individuals of all ages can acquire this virus. Only about 10 percent of confirmed cases have a travel history from Mexico. This indicates as well ongoing transmission in communities."

Health officials in Texas Tuesday confirmed the first death of a U.S. resident from H1N1 flu in a woman in Cameron County, on the U.S.-Mexico border. The woman, who has not been identified, had other chronic health problems, said officials with the Texas Department of State Health.

Last week, a toddler from Mexico City visiting family in Texas died in a Houston hospital, the first such flu death in the United States.

Dr. Besser said the CDC expects that more cases, more hospitalizations and more deaths from this outbreak will occur over the coming days and weeks. "I expect that as we see more cases in more places, as we see more severe cases that we will see more deaths in this country," he said today.

In Geneva, Fukuda told reporters, "We're very careful to say we expect the situation to evolve and we're not quite sure how it will evolve. We have seen pandemics cause huge numbers of deaths. In the 1918 pandemic, at least 20 million people died in one year from that infection. It

started mild in the spring and over several months became a severe illness."

"We're jumping so hard on this new virus because if it stays mild, that's great," said Fukuda, "but if it turns severe, that is something we have to know about."

When the Southern Hemisphere goes into winter time, Fukuda explained, typically we see and increase in activity for flu viruses. Also the population in the Southern Hemisphere is different from that in the Northern Hemisphere. The younger population in large developing countries and regions may be more vulnerable due to malnourishment, war, and conditions like HIV infections, he said.

"In the past, we have seen that when seasonal flu hits these populations, what was mild in the industrialized world has been devastating to developing world," he said.

"Pandemics don't develop quickly," Fukuda warned. "This will develop over months and years."

The World Health Organization is taking this time to work with countries to help the be as prepared as possible for a potential pandemic. Fukuda said, "There are things countries can do, and we can help them to prevent people from getting sick if the virus turns more virulent and occurs in many places."

A vaccine against the A/H1N1 influenza could be ready in four to six months, and meanwhile, said Fukuda, there are several lines of defense.

"When you are facing a new disease threat, the most important thing is to give people information, especially in the beginning," he said. Other measures that can be taken without drugs such as personal hygiene, washing hands - these steps can be taken by any country. Isolation and quarantine can be very helpful."

Then there are anti-viral drugs and hospitalization if people require ventilation. Manufacturers' capacity to make anti-viral drugs has increased a great deal, Fukuda said.

Officials with WHO, the U.S., Canadian and Mexican governments all stated today that pork is clean and eating properly cooked pork from healthy animals does not transmit influenza A/H1N1, although it has been nicknamed swine flu.

In the municipality of Zamora, at a medical clinic, Mexican President Felipe Calderon ate carnitas, a typical Michoacan dish, accompanied by Michoacan Governor Leonel Godoy, the Secretary of Agriculture Alberto Cardenas, Environment Secretary Rafael Elvira, and the reporters covering their activities to show that eating pork poses no risk to health.

"We are going to eat carnitas, not only because they taste good but to show that eating pork is not risky," said Calderon. "The only risk would be if we eliminated a productive activity that provides income and work for many people in Michoacan and the rest of the country," he said.

After the closure of most public places and government offices over the Cinco de Mayo holiday, Mexico is now slowly reopening schools and offices. The president stressed that one of the key aspects of resuming normal activities is to encourage a greater culture of prevention among Mexicans.

"What we must do is not stay cooped up in our homes all day, because that is not possible because life must go on, but what we must do is to increase preventive actions in our everyday lives," he said.

WHO is not recommending any travel or trade restrictions related to the A/H1N1 outbreak. The U.S. State Department is advising people not to plan non-essential travel to Mexico.



Medical students attended a meeting in Mexico City Tuesday to receive training for the voluntary work they will be doing - applying quick tests to detect the A/H1N1 virus. (Photo by Sarihuella)