

As school starts, swine flu strikes

By Julia Prodis Sulek

jsulek@mercurynews.com

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Just one month into the new school year, campuses throughout San Jose are already reporting swine flu cases, leaving school nurses reaching for the anti-bacterial soap and bracing for what is expected to be a rampant swine flu season.

"So far, we're seeing a slow rise. It's like a bubbling pot ready to boil and it could take off at any time," said Melinda Landau, manager of health and family support systems at San Jose Unified School District.

Most of the district's 40 schools have reported at least one likely case since school started Aug. 17. But Castillero Middle School in Almaden Valley was sending home 11 or 12 students a day for the past two weeks — by far the most of any school in the district — before the virus seemed to subside this week.

While not all the cases were confirmed as swine flu, doctors and nurses said the flu — also known as H1N1 — was the most likely culprit since it's too early for seasonal flu. And unlike seasonal flu, this one is more likely to infect younger people; the average age of those struck is about 17.

Schools are trying to minimize the spread by encouraging students to wash their hands frequently and cough into the crooks of their arms.

The response is markedly different from last spring, when the flu was still somewhat of a mystery and was spreading around the globe.

Then, six schools were closed throughout the county. The school play at Branham High was postponed. Field trips were canceled. And graduating seniors were discouraged from shaking hands after the ceremony.

When the illness proved no worse than the seasonal flu for most healthy people, the Santa Clara County Health Department changed its recommendations on school closures. Instead, it directed sick students to stay home and not return until 24 hours after the fever breaks without medication.

"It's just the flu," said Jackie Zeller, principal at Lincoln High School in San Jose where four students have contracted the virus. Two were out over the past two weeks and two are out this week. "They're out for a couple of days, their fever breaks, they come back."

She has sent an automated message home reminding parents to keep their children home if they are sick and to remind them to wash their hands. Antibacterial hand lotions are conspicuous in every classroom, she said.

Among the struck Lincoln High students was junior Zoe Ridolfi-Starr, 16. She got sick two weeks after school began and stayed home for a week.

"I took Tamiflu and a lot of Ibuprofen for the fever," she said. "My muscles were really achy and sore. I was extremely tired with a very sore throat, coughing, fever. With the flu I had before, there was a lot of throwing up. Thankfully, there wasn't a lot of that."

While some pregnant women and people with chronic illnesses or other health problems have become seriously ill because of swine flu — and five people have died in Santa Clara since the outbreak began — most reactions among young healthy people have been mild.

If parents suspect their child might have swine flu, they should call the family doctor and ask for advice before going in, said Dr. Yvonne Maldonado, director of pediatric infectious diseases at Stanford Medical School.

"The key is that so far it hasn't been a serious illness in children," Maldonado said. "That's a little reassuring. We are obviously watching out to make sure symptoms don't evolve and get worse over the course of the season."