

Swine flu hits hard, early — claims 11 more kids

By LAURAN NEERGAARD, AP Medical Writer Lauran Neergaard, AP Medical Writer — FRI OCT 16, 6:58 PM ET

WASHINGTON — Swine flu is causing unprecedented illness for so early in the fall — including a worrisome count of child deaths — and the government warned Friday that vaccine supplies will be even more scarce than expected through this month.

Federal health officials said 11 more children have died in the past week because of the virus.

Manufacturer delays mean 28 million to 30 million doses, at most, will be divided around the country by the end of the month, not the 40 million-plus that states had been expecting. The new count from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention means anxiously awaited flu-shot clinics in some parts of the country may have to be postponed.

It also delays efforts to blunt increasing infections. Overall, what CDC calls the 2009 H1N1 flu is causing widespread disease in 41 states, and about 6 percent of all doctor visits are for flu-like illness — levels not normally seen until much later in the fall.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says about half of the child deaths since September have been among teenagers.

And overall for the country, deaths from pneumonia and flu-like illnesses have passed what CDC considers an epidemic level. About 6 percent of all doctor visits are for flu-like illnesses, levels not normally seen until later in the fall.

The CDC's Dr. Anne Schuchat (SHU'-kit) says, "These are very sobering statistics."

This new strain is different from regular winter flu because it strikes the young far more than the old, and child deaths are drawing particular attention. Eighty-six children have died of swine flu in the U.S. since it burst on the scene last spring — 43 of those deaths reported in September and early October alone, said CDC's Dr. Anne Schuchat.

That's a startling number because in some past winters, the CDC has counted 40 or 50 child deaths for the entire flu season, she said, and no one knows how long this swine flu outbreak will last. Half of those early fall child deaths are among teenagers, also surprising as preschoolers are thought to be most vulnerable.

"These are very sobering statistics," Schuchat said.

Also in contrast to regular winter flu, swine flu sometimes can cause a very severe viral pneumonia in otherwise healthy young adults, the World Health Organization warned Friday.

Typically, influenza weakens people so they're vulnerable to bacterial pneumonia, especially those over age 65. But the new H1N1 can dive deeper into the lungs, in "small subsets" of patients who go into respiratory failure within days, said WHO medical officer Dr. Nikki Shindo.

"Do not delay the treatment," she said as WHO ended a three-day meeting of 100 international flu specialists gathered in Washington.

The new swine flu strain also may have hit some pigs at the Minnesota State Fair in late August, animals possibly infected by some sick 4-H students. If the infection is confirmed, it wouldn't be a surprise: A sick farm worker first infected pigs in Canada last spring, and herds have been hit in Australia and Argentina, too. The virus doesn't spread to humans who eat pork.

Fortunately, most people recover from the new strain with simple at-home care, just as with the regular flu. While there aren't precise counts, states have reported more than 2,000 deaths from pneumonia or flu-like illnesses to the CDC since Aug. 30. And Schuchat said other tracking systems show those deaths have reached the level that each year is used to declare an influenza epidemic, months early.

As of Wednesday, states had ordered 8 million of the 11.4 million doses of swine flu vaccine the government has ready to ship. Just over half of the vaccine now available is in shot form and the rest as a nasal spray. First in line for scarce H1N1 vaccine are supposed to be pregnant women, anyone age 6 months to 24 years, health care workers and people under 65 with flu-risky conditions.

CDC's Schuchat urged patience, saying eventually enough vaccine will be here for everyone who wants it: "I know this is frustrating for people."

Regular winter flu kills 36,000 Americans a year, and around the country some clinics aren't getting shipments of seasonal vaccine as quickly as expected either, as manufacturers juggle the extra work. About 82 million doses of seasonal vaccine have been shipped, and 114 million eventually will arrive, enough for typical demand, Schuchat said.

Also Friday, judges in New York granted temporary restraining orders blocking mandatory [flu vaccinations](#) for health care workers who argued they should have a choice. In addition to New York, many hospitals nationwide have mandated shots for their employees this year so they don't infect patients or have to miss work.

Even though swine flu is all that's circulating here now, the regular winter flu that targets older adults has hit other countries along with the new H1N1. South Africa packed in two distinct [flu seasons](#) in one winter. WHO's Dr. Vivek Shinde said the extremely early swine flu start in the Northern Hemisphere increases the chance that those countries, too, will get a double-whammy, making it important not to skip the seasonal shot.

"There is a lot of winter left between now and April," he told the WHO meeting.

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