

US swine flu deaths surpass 1,000

By MIKE STOBBE, AP Medical Writer Mike Stobbe, Ap Medical Writer— OCTOBER 24 2009

ATLANTA — More Americans have been vaccinated against seasonal flu this fall than ever before by this time of year, federal health officials said Friday.

Sixty million people have gotten the winter flu vaccine — probably because they're paying more attention to flu warnings in general, thanks to swine flu. It's an unprecedented number of seasonal flu shots for October; most usually aren't given until later in the fall.

Part of it is due to supply: There are already 85 million doses of seasonal flu vaccine available, a much larger amount than usual for this early in the fall. Most years, roughly 100 million doses are used during the season.

But a big factor probably is that swine flu — also known as the 2009 H1N1 virus — is drawing attention to public health warnings that seasonal flu is also a deadly illness that can be prevented through vaccinations, said Joe Quimby, a spokesman for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"There's been a heightened awareness in the American public due to H1N1 this year," said Quimby.

Meanwhile, swine flu is more widespread now than it's ever been, and has resulted in more than 1,000 U.S. deaths so far. Flu illnesses are as widespread now as they are at the winter peak of normal flu seasons, said CDC Director Dr. Thomas Frieden.

"Many millions" of Americans have had swine flu so far, according to an estimate he gave at a Friday press conference. The government doesn't test everyone to confirm swine flu so it doesn't have an exact count.

Frieden updated some other estimates, too, saying there have been more than 20,000 hospitalizations.

Nearly 100 swine flu deaths in children have been reported, CDC officials also said.

Forty-six states now have widespread flu activity. The only states without widespread flu are Connecticut, Hawaii, New Jersey and South Carolina. There are at least two different types of flu causing illnesses; tests from about 5,000 patients suggest that nearly all the flu cases are swine flu.

This year's seasonal flu vaccine won't protect against swine flu; a separate swine flu vaccine is needed. Vaccine production takes several months, and the work on seasonal vaccine was already well under way when swine flu was first identified in April. It was too late for the swine flu virus to be included in the seasonal doses.

Because of swine flu production delays, the government has backed off initial, optimistic estimates that as many as 120 million vaccine doses would be available by mid-October. As of Wednesday, only 11 million doses had been shipped to health departments, doctor's offices and other providers across the country, CDC officials said.

"It's frustrating to all of us. We wish there were more vaccine available," Frieden said.

The flu virus has to be grown in chicken eggs, and the yield hasn't been as high as was initially hoped, CDC officials explained. "Even if you yell at them, they don't grow faster," Frieden said.

He added that 5 million new doses became available in the past week, and vaccine should be more plentiful soon.