

First US swine flu death; school closings possible

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President Barack Obama leaves the White House, Wednesday, April 29, 2009, for a trip to St. Louis, Mo.. to hold a town hall meeting. (AP Photo/Ron Edmonds)

(AP) -- President Barack Obama said Wednesday that wider school closings in the U.S. may be necessary in an escalating global health emergency that claimed the first death in the United States and swept Germany onto the roster of afflicted nations. Obama said local schools across America should consider temporarily shutting down if conditions worsen.

Giving an update on a rising menace that has dominated health officials' time and caused spreading anxiety, Obama said, "Every American should know that the federal government is prepared to do whatever is

necessary to control this virus."

He said he wanted to extend "my thoughts and prayers" to the family of a 23-month-old Mexican boy who died in Houston, the first confirmed U.S. fatality among more than five dozen infections. Health officials in Texas said the child had traveled with his family from Mexico to Brownsville in south Texas and was brought to Houston after becoming ill and died Monday night.

"This is obviously a serious situation," and "we are closely and continuously monitoring" it, Obama said.

Meanwhile, the commandant of the Marine Corps said a Marine in southern California might have the illness and 39 Marines were being confined until tests come back. General James Conway told a Pentagon briefing an initial test indicated the sick Marine - who was not identified - might have [swine flu](#) but his illness did not appear life-threatening.

Obama said it is the recommendation of public health officials that authorities at schools with confirmed or suspected cases of swine flu "should strongly consider temporarily closing so that we can be as safe as possible."

Obama was underscoring advice that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provided earlier to cities and states, and that some schools - most prominently in New York City - already have followed.

"If the situation becomes more serious and we have to take more extensive steps, then parents should also think about contingencies if schools in their areas do temporarily shut down, figuring out and planning what their child care situation would be," Obama advised.

Obama said the federal government is "prepared to do whatever is

necessary to control the impact of this virus." He noted his request for \$1.5 billion in emergency funding to ensure adequate supplies of vaccines.

Germany confirmed three cases Wednesday, and Britain and Spain had reported cases earlier. New Zealand's total rose to 14.

There were also 13 cases in Canada, two in Israel, and one in Austria.

Egypt's government ordered the slaughter of all pigs in the country as a precaution, though no swine flu cases have been reported there. Egypt's overwhelmingly Muslim population does not eat pork, but farmers raise some 300,000-350,000 pigs for the Christian minority.

The disease is not spread by eating pork, and farmers were to be allowed to sell the meat from the slaughtered animals.

In the U.S., Obama said the government needs local agencies to help by looking out for any suspected flu cases.

And he advised people to take their own precautions - washing hands, staying home if they are sick, and keeping sick kids home.

The world has no vaccine to prevent infection but U.S. health officials aim to have a key ingredient for one ready in early May, the big step that vaccine manufacturers are awaiting. But even if the World Health Organization ordered up emergency vaccine supplies - and that decision hasn't been made yet - it would take at least two more months to produce the initial shots needed for human safety testing.

"We're working together at 100 miles an hour to get material that will be useful," Dr. Jesse Goodman, who oversees the Food and Drug Administration's swine flu work, told The Associated Press.

And the U.S. is shipping to states not only enough anti-flu medication for 11 million people, but also masks, hospital supplies and flu test kits.

Dr. Richard Besser, acting head of the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), was asked Wednesday why the problem seems so much more severe in Mexico than in the United States.

He replied that U.S. officials "have teams on the ground, a tri-national team in Mexico, working with Canada and Mexico, to try and understand those differences, because they can be helpful as we plan and implement our control strategies."

Cuba and Argentina banned flights to Mexico, where swine flu is suspected of killing more than 150 people and sickening well over 2,000. In a bit of good news, Mexico's health secretary, Jose Cordova, late Tuesday called the death toll there "more or less stable."

Mexico City, one of the world's largest cities, has taken drastic steps to curb the virus' spread, starting with shutting down schools and on Tuesday expanding closures to gyms and swimming pools and even telling restaurants to limit service to takeout. People who venture out tend to wear masks in hopes of protection.

The number of confirmed swine flu cases in the United States included 45 in New York, 11 in California, six in Texas, two in Kansas and one each in Indiana and Ohio, but cities and states suspected more. In New York, the city's health commissioner said "many hundreds" of schoolchildren were ill at a school where some students had confirmed cases.

The WHO argues against closing national borders to stem the spread, and the U.S. - although checking arriving travelers for the ill who may need care - agrees it's too late for that tactic.

Authorities sought to keep the crisis in context: Flu deaths are common around the world. In the U.S. alone, the CDC says about 36,000 people a year die of flu-related causes. The regular flu kills just under 100 U.S. children every winter - 73 in the 2006-2007 flu season. Still, the CDC calls the new strain a combination of pig, bird and human viruses for which people may have limited natural immunity.

Hence the need for a vaccine. Using samples of the flu taken from people who fell ill in Mexico and the U.S., scientists are engineering a strain that could trigger the immune system without causing illness. The hope is to get that ingredient - called a "reference strain" in vaccine jargon - to manufacturers around the second week of May, so they can begin their own laborious production work, said CDC's Dr. Ruben Donis, who is leading that effort.

Vaccine manufacturers are just beginning production for next winter's regular influenza vaccine, which protects against three human flu strains. The WHO wants them to stay with that course for now - it won't call for mass production of a swine flu vaccine unless the outbreak worsens globally. But sometimes new flu strains pop up briefly at the end of one flu season and go away only to re-emerge the next fall, and at the very least there should be a vaccine in time for next winter's flu season, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the National Institutes of Health's infectious diseases chief, said Tuesday.

"Right now it's moving very rapidly," he said of the vaccine development.

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