

US confirms first swine flu death (Update + Latest snapshot of swine flu crisis)

May 5 2009

US health officials confirmed the first death of a US citizen from swine flu Tuesday and announced a spike in the number of confirmed cases, but assured there was no cause for alarm.

A woman in her thirties with "chronic underlying health conditions" died Monday in a Texas hospital, becoming the first US citizen to die of the virus, Doug McBride, spokesman for the Texas Department of State Health Services told AFP.

"My understanding is she had not had recent travel to Mexico," the epicenter of the (A)H1N1 outbreak, said McBride.

"She was a US citizen, a resident of Cameron County," which is the southernmost county of Texas and shares a border with Mexico, and had spent three weeks in hospital, he said.

The woman's death was the second in the United States after a Mexican toddler died last month while visiting Texas.

It was also only the second death outside Mexico, where 29 people have died of (A)H1N1 since the swine flu outbreak was first reported by the World Health Organization on April 24.

As the death of the American woman was announced, US health officials said there had been a spike in the number of confirmed infections, but said the uptick was expected.

"There are over 403 confirmed cases," up from 286 reported Monday in the United States, Richard Besser, acting head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) told a daily news briefing.

The spike "doesn't reflect transmission as much as that we're catching up with the testing," Besser added.

"As we get these test kits out to state labs and as they get up to speed, some of the backlog that they've had on testing will go away and we'll see a big bump in the number of cases," he said.

So far, only 35 people have been hospitalized in the United States because of the new strain of H1N1, or swine flu.

"What we're seeing is rates of hospitalization that are similar to what we see with seasonal flu," said Besser.

But given that seasonal flu sends some 200,000 people to hospital and kills around 36,000 people in the United States each year, he said that health officials "expect to see additional hospitalizations and it's likely we would see additional deaths" from the (A)H1N1 virus.

Because the disease being less severe than anticipated, Besser and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius eased official guidelines on closures of schools with confirmed cases of (A)H1N1 flu.

Infected students and staff should stay at home but schools should "feel comfortable about reopening" and should "cease closures" when the virus is found in a student or staff member, Sebelius said.

"This is presenting itself more like seasonal flu, and in seasonal flu time, the only time a school would consider closing is when enough of the teachers and enough of the student population had gotten the flu, so that

they really could not function," Sebelius said.

More than 400 schools around the United States have shut their doors, dismissing nearly a quarter of a million students, since the flu outbreak began.

But even though the virus in the United States was less severe than anticipated, US health authorities vowed they would not let down their guard against (A)H1N1.

"We don't know what will happen over the course of the summer and we certainly don't know what will happen when we get back into flu season," said Sebelius, vowing to continue to aggressively fight the virus.

Experts have warned that the new influenza strain could die down during the warm summer months before returning in a more lethal form in the autumn, with the start of the next flu season.

Latest snapshot of swine flu crisis

An overview of the current swine flu crisis:

OVERALL: The World Health Organisation says 1,516 cases of influenza A(H1N1) infections have been reported, including 30 who have died from the disease.

The following WHO figures may differ from those of national authorities because of a time-lag in notification and publication.

DEATHS

Mexico: 29

United States: 1

CONFIRMED INFECTIONS (including the deaths)

Mexico: 822

United States: 403

Canada: 165

Spain: 57

Britain: 27

Germany: 9

New Zealand: 6

Italy: 5

France: 4

Israel: 4

El Salvador: 2

South Korea: 2

Austria: 1

Colombia: 1

Costa Rica: 1

Denmark: 1

Guatemala 1

Hong Kong: 1

Ireland: 1

Netherlands: 1

Portugal 1

Switzerland 1

Guatemala 1

NATIONS WITH PARTIAL OR TOTAL BANS ON PORK

IMPORTS: Bahrain, Belarus, Chad, China, Croatia, Ecuador, Gabon, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Macedonia, Montenegro, Lebanon, Russia, Serbia, South Korea, Thailand, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates. Egypt has ordered the slaughter of pigs reared on its territory.

NATIONS WHICH HAVE SUSPENDED FLIGHTS TO MEXICO:

Cuba. Argentina, China and Peru have banned flights from Mexico.

The WHO has not recommended travel restrictions or the closing of borders.

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