

Swine flu rises at US colleges as students return

August 28 2009, By DORIE TURNER , Associated Press Writer



FILE - A Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2009 photo shows a bottle of hand sanitizer and a sign about swine flu on a window in front of Marilyn Hallam at the health center at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. Colleges across the country are seeing spikes in the number of students with flu-like symptoms as dorms fill up and classes begin for the fall semester. (AP Photo/Mike Fuentes)

(AP) -- Georgia Tech freshman Elise Woodall was met with a message scrawled on the bathroom mirror of her dorm when she moved in two weeks ago: "Wash your hands. Swine is not fine."

Colleges across the country are seeing spikes in the number of students with suspected cases of swine flu as dorms fill up and classes begin for the fall semester.

"Nobody wants to get sick because missing classes is a pain," said

Woodall, 18, a biomedical engineering major from Marietta, Ga.

While the increases were expected and colleges say they were ready for the coughing, sneezing and feverish students before move-in day, health experts say hundreds more could get sick as the virus winds its way through college campuses.

At Georgia Tech in Atlanta, classes are in full swing for the university's 20,000 students, and so is the highly contagious H1N1 virus, commonly known as swine flu.

The university has had 150 suspected cases of the virus in the two weeks since students moved back to campus.

At the University of Kansas, nearly 200 students have reported having flu-like symptoms in the last week or so, spokesman Todd Cohen said. University of Tennessee administrators are estimating about 100 suspected swine flu cases on campus, spokesman Jay Mayfield said.

The University of Alabama had more than 50 cases of flu reported on the first day of classes last week. At Texas Christian University, 10 students were diagnosed with swine flu on the first day of class Monday.

"We're finding out for the first time in a long time how quickly a contagious disease can move," said Don Mills, vice chancellor for student affairs at Texas Christian.

To get ready for the expected outbreak, colleges stocked up on hand sanitizing gel and [Tamiflu](#) - an anti-viral pill - while others have designated empty dorms where sick students can be isolated. Some campuses have developed "flu kits" with items like tissues, thermometers and box lunches for students in isolation.

Students have been getting regular e-mails from administrators reminding them to wash their hands frequently, stay away from sick friends and isolate themselves if they develop flu-like symptoms.

"We all knew this was going to happen," said Liz Rachun, spokeswoman for the University of Georgia health clinic, which has seen nearly 50 suspected swine flu cases in the last two weeks. "We stocked up on masks and we have doctors in place."

Health experts predicted swine flu cases would spike once the school year began and that colleges and elementary and secondary schools would see an increase in cases.

Most campuses won't know for certain how many confirmed swine flu cases they have this year because many states are no longer routinely running tests on every suspected case. Still, many administrators say they're treating every case as if it's swine flu to help stem the spread of the disease.

Health officials say the concern is that [swine flu](#) is very contagious and spreads quickly once it is introduced to a population. That means hundreds more could get sick in the next few weeks.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta recommends [students](#) with flu symptoms - fever, cough, sneezing, chills, aches, sometimes diarrhea or vomiting - stay home from class.

"The mere fact you have lots of people in close proximity with each other results in the virus being transmitted from person to person," said CDC spokesman Tom Skinner. "I don't think we're surprised by the fact influenza is returning to these campuses. What is concerning to us is people becoming complacent about this and not taking the steps we know can protect them."

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