

CDC's swine flu toll: 4,000 dead, 22 million ill

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Scarlett Adkins, 1, is held by her mother, Kera Adkins, Thursday, Nov. 12, 2009 as she reacts to getting her H1N1 vaccine shot from nurse Rhonda Woolum in Ashland, Ken. The Boyd County Health Department gave the shots out by appointment only. (AP Photo/The Independent, John Flavell)

(AP) -- Estimates of deaths caused by the swine flu have grown to nearly 4,000 since April, roughly quadrupling previous estimates. But that doesn't mean swine flu suddenly has worsened.

Instead, the federal numbers made public Thursday reflect a long-awaited better attempt to quantify the new flu's true toll. Most cases still don't require a doctor's care.

[Swine flu](#) has sickened about 22 million Americans since April and killed about 540 children.

And it's still early in the season.

"I am expecting all of these numbers, unfortunately, to continue to rise," said Dr. Anne Schuchat of the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). "We have a long [flu season](#) ahead of us."

Tight supplies of vaccine to combat the illness continue: Not quite 42 million doses are currently available, a few million less than CDC had predicted last week.

A new Associated Press-GfK poll shows nearly 1 in 6 parents has gotten at least some of their children vaccinated against swine flu since inoculations began last month. An additional 14 percent of parents sought vaccine but couldn't find any.

Only about 30 percent of children routinely get flu vaccinations during a normal winter. That even this many have gotten vaccinated against the new flu, which scientists call the 2009 H1N1 strain, despite the shortage suggests CDC's target-the-young message has gotten through.

But three times as many [adults](#) have tried and failed to find vaccine for themselves as have succeeded.

And interest among the young adults who also are at high risk is waning fast, found the AP-GfK poll of 1,006 adults nationwide.

Schuchat urged patience in seeking vaccine.

"It's a marathon and not a sprint," she said. "More vaccine is being ordered and delivered and used every day."

Until now, the CDC has conservatively estimated more than 1,000 deaths and "many millions" of new H1N1 infections. The agency was

devoting more time to battling the [pandemic](#) than to counting it. Earlier figures were based on laboratory-confirmed cases even as doctors largely quit using flu tests months ago - and experts knew that deaths from things like the bacterial pneumonia that often follows flu were being missed.

Thursday's report attempts to calculate the first six months of the new H1N1 strain's spread, from April through mid-October. The CDC said:

- Some 98,000 people have been hospitalized from this new flu or its complications, including 36,000 children, 53,000 adults younger than 65 and 9,000 older adults.
- Deaths could range from a low of 2,500 to as many as 6,100, depending on how the data's analyzed. CDC settled on 3,900 as the best estimate.
- Some 8 million children have become ill, 12 million adults younger than 65 and 2 million older adults.

In a typical winter, seasonal flu strains cause 200,000 U.S. hospitalizations and 36,000 deaths, the vast majority in people over 65. Seasonal influenza doesn't usually start circulating until November. Swine flu began a big climb in September, leading to what CDC called unprecedented high levels of illness so early in a season - and no way to know when the flu will peak.

The estimate of child deaths may seem especially surprising, considering the CDC's conservative count of lab-confirmed pediatric deaths a week ago was 129.

"We don't think things have changed from last week to this week," Schuchat stressed, explaining the importance of looking beyond those

lab counts. It's "a better estimate for the big picture of what's out there."

The question now is what effect those estimates will have on a public that largely views swine flu as not that big a threat.

The AP-GfK poll, conducted last weekend, found just 23 percent of responders - and 27 percent of parents - were very likely to keep seeking vaccine.

Stephanie Hannon of Douglas, Mass., decided to get a swine flu vaccine for just one of her three children, the one at extra risk because of asthma. She's concerned that the swine flu vaccine hasn't been studied long enough to justify for her less-at-risk youngsters.

"Only because of my other daughter's condition, I felt like I didn't have a choice," she said. "You never know if you make the right decision."

Swine flu targets young adults, too, yet just 16 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds were very likely to seek [vaccine](#), down from 34 percent in September.

The AP-GfK Poll was conducted Nov. 5-9 by GfK Roper Public Affairs and Media. It involved landline and cell phone interviews with 1,006 adults nationwide and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

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