

Double flu blow forces Saint Petersburg school closures

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An outbreak of swine flu has claimed some 22 lives in Russia's second city Saint Petersburg and combined with high rates of seasonal flu to force authorities to close schools and send residents flocking to pharmacies.

Saint Petersburg has recorded the highest number of swine flu deaths in an outbreak that has claimed some 80 victims nationwide since the start of the winter, according to AFP calculations based on statements by regional officials.

Authorities say there are treating some 12,000 people with [flu symptoms](#) every day and up to 80 percent of these cases could be swine flu, also known as the H1N1 virus.

To stop regular flu and the H1N1 virus from spreading, the city's primary schools will be closed for two weeks from February 1, and some parents have already taken action.

"I don't want to take any risks," said Lyubov Anikanova, who has refused to send her daughter to school over fears she could catch the flu.

"We are hearing that swine flu is very dangerous this year."

Russian officials have tried to downplay the seriousness of the outbreak with health minister Veronika Skvortsova saying Monday that the [swine flu](#) situation in the country was "completely under control."

The country's top doctor said on Tuesday that the recent uptick in flu figures was not out of the ordinary.

"The incidence of flu is above average in some regions," the country's top doctor, Anna Popova, told Interfax news agency. "But overall the number of cases does not exceed the average over many years."

Rush at the drugstore

Despite the assurance from officials the recent flu cases have seen residents of Petersburg head to drugstores to stock up on medication and masks, emptying the shelves of pharmacies across town.

Some chemists have now already run-out of prescription flu medication and other flu-season essentials.

"We haven't had many popular medications for a week now," said pharmacist Natalia Selezneva.

Health authorities have pledged to restock pharmacies with 100,000 masks and flu medication to face increasing demand.

"I would like to resist the panic," 67-year-old pensioner Maya Yakovleva told AFP. "But right now, the flu is everyone's favourite topic: where to buy (medicine), the number of people who have died. It seems this is all we talk about."

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