

OUR VIEW

Flu response gives a sense of confidence

OUR POSITION: Health officials appear to have a handle on the swine flu outbreak. The message: Stay calm and stay alert.

It's hard for people not to get a little edgy when they see photos of people with surgical masks on the front pages of their newspaper morning after morning and on the TV news shows night after night. Health officials around the world are responding rapidly to the new strain of swine flu that emerged last week in Mexico City. Organizations from the World Health Organization and the National Centers for Disease Control to county health departments have kicked into gear. They're coordinating with one another, preparing for the worst and sending a clear message to the public: Stay alert. Do your homework. Be calm. The coordination and competence shown so far by public health officials is reassuring. It's a large step forward from the national over-reaction to the swine flu epidemic in the 1970s, which was later seen to have caused more problems — and deaths — than it might have cured. As of Tuesday night, no cases of the new flu had been reported in Florida, but officials said they wouldn't be surprised to see some soon. They are preparing for that possibility. Monday morning, health department officials and representatives from hospitals in Charlotte, Sarasota and DeSoto counties met to share information and address an appropriate community response. State health officials planned daily meetings to update county emergency management directors and health department officials. In DeSoto County, home to a large Hispanic population, hospital and health officials were careful to advise anyone with flu-like respiratory symptoms to wear a mask and sanitize hands. In Charlotte County, Health Department officials planned to advise doctors to tell patients with symptoms to call first before coming in and possibly spreading the flu to others. It's smart to take precautions. If you think you've caught the flu bug, call a doctor. While this is the tail end of the annual flu season, it's important to remember it still is the season. Chances are great your bug is not the swine flu strain. The good news also is this flu virus has been successfully treated with the common drugs Tamiflu and Relenza. Drug makers have reported supplies are good, but they have stepped up production. State officials also said they would increase their Tamiflu stock in coming weeks so that they have some 500,000 doses on hand, just in case. Call a doctor if you experience symptoms — fever, coughing, sore throat, the same as other strains of flu. Don't rely on the flu shot you had at the beginning of the winter; it may not protect you. Stay home from work or school if you are sick. As you would with a cold or any other type of flu, try not to spread germs. Wash your hands frequently, cover your nose when you sneeze and avoid contact with others. If you have any questions, call your local health department. On the Internet, try the Web sites www.cdc.gov/swineflu or wee.pandemicflu.gov. There's no need for panic, but it's always wise to stay alert.