

## Be vigilant, knowledgeable with swine flu

**OUR POSITION:** Don't ignore the swine flu threat and don't panic. Get the facts and stay alert.

We've already been through several ups and downs of the swine flu roller coaster, so there may be a tendency in for some people to coast and ignore what they see to be hype, while others overreact to daily news events. That may be understandable, but it's also a bad idea. The H1N1 virus will surely sicken many people in the coming flu season. The overwhelming number of swine flu cases have been mild, so far, but there have been well-publicized exceptions. The announcement that two Sarasota-area men died last week from flu complications has established that well enough. But health officials throughout the world are advising people not to panic when facing the pandemic. "These deaths are tragic and a sobering reminder that influenza is serious and can be fatal," Dr. William Heymann, medical executive director for the Sarasota County Health Department, said last week. "It reminds residents to take precautions." It's best to be prepared and to be armed with good information. So far, it appears this specific flu strain does not make people any sicker than other types of flu. This means most people who are bitten by the flu bug will just feel miserable for a few days.

The H1N1 flu has shown to be no more deadly than typical strains so far, with perhaps one death in 10,000 or 20,000. But, the Tampa Tribune noted last week, the H1N1 virus infects people at a rate that's twice as high as typical flu strains. And since the common flu kills 36,000 Americans each year, the natural outcome of the more virulent strain will be significant. A swine flu vaccine is being tested now and may be available by the fall. State and local health departments have had mass immunization plans in place for years, but this outbreak has thrown them a curve. It is expected that the H1N1 vaccine will require a series of two shots, 21 to 28 days apart, said Adam Dubuis of the Charlotte County Health Department. The H1N1 shots would be in addition to the regular seasonal flu vaccine, which will be administered starting in mid-October. County officials say they are ready. At Port Charlotte Middle School last year, the Health Department conducted drivethrough vaccination clinics that worked well, Dubuis said. Sarasota County Health Department officials have been meeting with schools and others to map out a special immunization program, said department spokeswoman Dianne Shipley. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also has stockpiled antiviral drugs that can minimize the effects of the swine flu if you catch it.

Individuals also should know what they're dealing with and take precautions. H1N1 flu symptoms are like other strains: fever, coughing, sore throat, headaches and fatigue. With a typical flu virus, higher risk groups are people aged 65 and older and children under five years old. However, the higher age group so far does not appear to be affected more than others by the swine flu. Those who come down with respiratory illness should stay home. Call your doctor for advice. Everyone else is advised to take the normal flu precautions: Avoid contact with people who are coughing; avoid touching your eyes and mouth; wash your hands carefully and often; and cover your nose and mouth when you cough. For extra credit, sneeze into your sleeve, not your hand; this reduces the chances you will transfer the virus by touching another person, or a common surface like a doorknob. Don't panic, but don't ignore the potential for illness. Be careful. Be smart.