

Charlotte gets first dose of swine flu vaccine

By **JOSH SALMAN STAFF WRITER**

PUNTA GORDA — The Charlotte County Health Department received its first small shipment late Friday of vaccinations for the H1N1 virus, commonly known as swine flu.

The county received about 500 doses of the nasal spray that will be distributed to health care workers first, followed by pregnant women and young children.

Charlotte will continue to get small allocations of the vaccine weekly, and the health department will tailor its distribution plan accordingly, said Wanda Toby, planning and preparedness manager for the health department.

“We’re focusing on health and medical workers right now,” she said. “And our plan from there will really depend on how much we receive each week.”

While the first shipment of vaccine won’t be accessible to the general public, Toby said parents should be on the lookout for vaccine permission slips that could be sent home as early as this week.

Once the area’s medical workers are vaccinated, the health department will roll out a countywide vaccination plan targeting high-risk groups — pregnant women, young children and residents with a prior chronic condition.

The county hopes to launch its public clinics by mid-November.

“We won’t be getting as much as other counties,” Toby said. “But hopefully by the time November comes, we’ll have a schedule of when and where we’ll be doing our public (points of dispensing).”

Symptoms of swine flu include fever, headache, dry cough, runny nose and body aches.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has advised people to reduce their risk by washing hands frequently, keeping a 6-foot social distance, covering coughs and staying home if symptoms arise.

Sarasota County also received its first shipment of the vaccine last week.

While Charlotte’s program will be voluntary, county officials recommend everyone get vaccinated.

“I am a bit disturbed to see reports of people saying they’re not going to get it, when we see children dying,” said Wayne Sallade, Charlotte County Emergency Management Director. “That bothers me. So, I’m hoping the people of Charlotte County are savvy enough to understand the importance of this.”

While the swine flu virus has had relatively mild effects on healthy adults, similar pandemics have brought a second wave that is typically stronger, Sallade said.

Sallade also recommends residents get vaccinated for the seasonal flu, especially the area’s elderly. “It’s taken some time, but things are starting to move,” he said. “(This vaccine) is very important.”

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