

## Feeling sick? Avoid visiting patients

By JOSH SALMAN STAFF WRITER

PORT CHARLOTTE — Regional hospitals are following a national trend of taking extra precautions with visitors in hopes of keeping the swine flu restrained.

From Fawcett Memorial to Englewood Community and Peace River, hospitals across Southwest Florida are working to mitigate potential outbreaks of the H1N1 virus, commonly known as the swine flu.

The most widespread exercise: tightening the belt on visitation.

“If you have a loved one in the hospital, a lot of times wild horses won’t keep you out,” said Michele Ritter, director of marketing for Fawcett Memorial Hospital in Port Charlotte. “But good hygiene by visitors can go a long way toward keeping patients safe.”

Area hospitals are stocking up on hand sanitizer, face masks and antibacterial soap for visitors, while posting signs stressing the potential dangers of stopping by with the sniffles.

The key to reducing H1N1 outbreaks lies with visitors taking increased personal responsibility, Ritter said.

Fawcett is asking all visitors who are feeling under the weather to stay at home, and if they must come in, they’re required to wear masks. The hospital also has several cough stations set up, encouraging visitors to continuously disinfect their hands.

“We’re really taking it to the extreme,” Ritter said. “If you’re not feeling well, we’re asking you not come today. We’re doing everything we can to stop the spread.”

Like Fawcett, Englewood Community Hospital installed cough stations by each entrance complete with hand sanitizer, gloves and masks. The hospital isn’t directly restricting visitation but is asking visitors to postpone their trip if symptoms arise, said Susan Rachles, marketing manager.

Englewood is also encouraging all frequent visitors to get vaccinated.

“We’re trying to get the word out,” Rachles said. “Our main thing is advising (ill visitors) not to come in.”

The Peace River Regional Medical Center has completely prohibited visitation from residents with any flu-like symptoms. The hospital is also pushing hygiene practices, according to a hospital statement.

Charlotte Regional Medical Center in Punta Gorda has deployed several similar initiatives.

“If someone has the flu, there’s a 98 percent chance it’s swine flu,” said Ladena Rhoden, infection control specialist with Charlotte Regional. “So (added precautions) need to be done for everyone’s protection, especially now.”

Nationally, many hospitals are taking the restrictions a step further.

Some hospitals are completely turning away visiting children. Others are making visitors fill out detailed questionnaires before entering.

The initiatives are all being done on a hospital-by-hospital basis, and neither the Centers for Disease Control nor American Hospital Association have issued set guidelines.

Still, healthcare officials would rather be safe than sorry.

“We’re still in the beginning phases of the epidemic,” said Dr. Mark Asperilla, infectious disease specialist. “More people means more risk. We need to minimize contact as much as possible. In a way, it’s a quarantine of sorts.”

To help prevent the spread, all medical workers throughout the region are getting first choice at available H1N1 vaccinations. Many hospitals are also mandating all employees and volunteers get a seasonal flu shot.

Under Sarasota, DeSoto and Charlotte’s current plan, healthcare workers will get the first doses of the H1N1 vaccinations as the shipments arrive weekly, according to the Florida Department of Health.

Many of these vaccines, though, have been delayed due to issues with production.

“Our first targets are healthcare personnel who work with children and pregnant women,” said Adam DuBois, spokesman for the **Charlotte County Health Department**. “But it’s a completely voluntary program. We’re just giving them the info and letting them make an informed decision.”

E-mail: [jsalman@sun-herald.com](mailto:jsalman@sun-herald.com)



SUN PHOTOS BY JOSH SALMAN,

[jsalman@sun-herald.com](mailto:jsalman@sun-herald.com) Englewood Community Hospital installed cough stations near each entrance to help keep the swine flu restrained. The hospital is discouraging visitation from residents with any flu-like symptoms.



Englewood Community Hospital has posted several signs encouraging visitors and patients to practice good hygiene. The hospital is also discouraging visitation from residents with flu-like symptoms.