

## Flu 'peak' doesn't mean it has passed

**OUR POSITION:** The worst of the H1N1 epidemic may —or may not — have passed. Stick with the program.

There's a notion that people may let their guard down after hearing news reports that swine flu may have peaked in the United States.

It's possible the worst may be over, according to the World Health Organization and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Then again, maybe not.

In a press conference and in interviews last week, the CDC's Dr. Anne Schuchat, head of national H1N1 response, emphasized the centers' four-step campaign to prevent the spread of illness:

- Travel well. That means you should consider traveling during the holiday season only if you are feeling well.
- Wash your hands often. This is an easy and effective way of slowing the spread of germs.
- Cover up. Cover your mouth when you sneeze, preferably using a tissue. Better yet, learn to sneeze into your sleeve.
- Get vaccinated.

The last has been the most difficult, because H1N1 flu vaccine production has been slower than had been predicted. Still, more than 60 million doses have been made available for state health departments across the country; nearly 3 million have been shipped to Florida.

Local health departments continue to target high-risk groups, which include pregnant women, people who live with or care for infants under six months old, health care workers, young adults age 18-24, and adults age 25-64 with chronic health conditions such as asthma, diabetes and heart disease. The Sarasota Health Department will have offered free swine flu shots to at-risk individuals at 15 sites served by the mobile medical unit this month. Charlotte will hold another clinic from 1 p.m. to 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Cultural Center.

But the program is finally being expanded to everyone who wants a shot. The Sarasota Health Department announced late Monday its first general-population clinics will be held on Saturday in Sarasota and Venice.

And as much as health officials try to assure people that there is no need to panic, they also hope people will not assume the risk has lessened since the worst of the illness may be over.

For one thing, Schuchat said, the peak is only a statistical midpoint. It means just as many people will get sick in coming months as were sick in previous months. Between April and the end of November, 22 million Americans came down with the swine flu. Approximately 100,000 have been hospitalized and 4,000 have died.

Health officials also suspect the virus could spread more during the holiday season, as more people mingle while shopping or attending parties. The seasonal flu often spikes in January, following hug-heavy Christmas visits.

In addition, we have no way of knowing what form the eventual pattern of infection will take. Some past pandemics have shown a late-season resurgence in the early spring. This could happen again.

Health officials are all on the same page on this one. They are preaching continued vigilance, especially for pregnant women and other high-risk groups. Everyone is asked to follow the four recommendations listed above. When the vaccination becomes available in the coming month, get a shot. If you get sick, call a doctor. If you've got any questions or concerns, call the county health department or look at their Web sites.