

Scottsdale Healthcare set for outbreak of flu

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Scottsdale Healthcare has reported only a slight increase in patients seeking medical treatment for flulike symptoms at its three hospitals, but it is prepared to handle any major outbreak of the swine flu.

State officials announced last week that an 8-year-old north Phoenix boy became the first confirmed case of swine flu in Arizona. The boy has recovered.

Scottsdale Healthcare has sent swab samples collected from patients treated at its three hospitals — Osborn, Shea and Thompson Peak — to the Arizona Department of Health Services for testing but has not had any confirmed cases of swine flu.

"We've had some people that have come in and had symptoms. We treated their symptoms. We were very alert to that all year," said Nancy Hicks-Arsenault, director of emergency services at Scottsdale Healthcare.

Scottsdale Fire Department spokeswoman Tiffani Nichols said field crews have not noticed any increase in emergencies that involved general illnesses.

"We are simply reiterating our normal precautions when treating potentially contagious patients," Nichols said. "Whether it's swine flu, the regular flu or active TB, our first-responders must always be prepared to safely treat ill citizens. We're reminding them of proper personal protective-equipment guidelines and hand-washing regimens."

Scottsdale Healthcare officials said they have done multiple disaster drills to prepare for a flu pandemic. In April 2007, its hospitals participated in a Valley-wide drill to treat mock patients with avian-flu symptoms.

The drill was part of the Coyote Crisis Campaign, which tests the readiness and collaboration among hospitals, fire and police departments, business, academic institutions, military and government, including health agencies at the county, state and federal levels.

The hospitals practiced triaging flu patients, screened employees and physicians entering the hospitals and enacted access-control points. Hospital visitors that day were asked to pass through simulated flu screenings and received educational material on flu.

Scottsdale Healthcare also has plans in place to maintain its operations in the event employees become sick, stay home to treat family members or do not show up to work to avoid the virus.

Hicks-Arsenault said residents who contract the flu should stay home, drink fluids to remain hydrated and use over-the-counter remedies. If their symptoms worsen, then it is time to see a doctor.

"I just want to reassure the public that we are here to take care of them. If they are worried about their health condition and they need to be treated, we would be happy to treat them in the emergency room," Hicks-Arsenault said.

Swine flu Q&A

Question: What precautions can people take to prevent the flu?

Answer: Stay away from people who are sick. If you care for someone at home who is ill, wear a protective mask. Wash hands frequently and for at least 15 seconds with soap and water. Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer to clean grocery store carts and things you touch in other public places.

Q: When does flu season end in Arizona?

A: That is hard to predict. The current flu season started late. It typically runs through the end of May. School is out by then and people are spending more time outdoors rather than in confined spaces.

Q: If you had the flu this season, can you get swine flu?

A: Yes. They are two different viruses.

Q: Is the current flu vaccine effective against swine flu?

A: The national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said it is not. A new vaccine must be developed.

Q: Does taking antiviral medication prevent swine flu?

A: No. It is used to treat patients who come down with the flu.

Q: Is wearing a mask effective against swine flu?

A: The CDC notes that there may be times during a pandemic when a person must be in a crowded setting or in close contact (within 6 feet) with people who might be ill. During those times, the use of a mask or a respirator might help prevent the spread of pandemic flu. Scottsdale Healthcare issues masks to patients who come to the emergency department with flulike symptoms to avoid spreading the virus. Visitors also can request a mask while at the hospital.

Source: Nancy Hicks-Arsenault, director of emergency services at Scottsdale Healthcare, and www.cdc.gov.