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Remember the keys to fighting H1N1 in young people

by Jane Looney

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There have been three deaths possibly related to H1N1 (swine) flu in Colorado over the last several weeks. All were people younger than 17. Fortunately, of the five hospitalizations in La Plata County since Sept. 1 (the official start of the 2009-10 flu season), all were treated and released. Two were teens and one was an 8-year-old from Montezuma County.

While local schools have reported some students absent with flu-like illness, they have primarily seen just a slight increase in the number of overall student absences because of illness.

“This doesn’t mean that in any given week, we won’t see more,” said Bari Wagner, San Juan Basin Health Department communicable disease nurse. Wagner is working with Durango School District 9-R, Bayfield and Archuleta school districts on a flu monitoring project.

“In fact, with H1N1 considered widespread in 26 states – including Colorado – we will see more,” said Wagner.

“So far, the majority of the flu-like illness that we’re seeing in our community has been mild,” said Dr. Carl Salka, Infectious Disease Specialist at Mercy Regional Medical Center. “People can primarily recover at home while taking precautions and be aware of potential warning signs but not panic,” said Salka. “The main concern is to monitor for severe illness requiring hospitalization.”

In children, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing.
- Bluish or gray skin color.
- Not drinking enough fluids.
- Severe or persistent vomiting.
- Not waking up or not interacting with others.

- Being so irritable that child does not want to be held.
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough.

“Parents of children with underlying conditions – such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease – are advised by the CDC to take extra precautions to stay healthy and these children will be getting vaccinated first,” said Salka.

Included in the second priority group for vaccinating is all people younger than 24 because H1N1 appears to be disproportionately affecting this population.

San Juan Basin Health Department is coordinating in-school clinics so that as many parents who want to will be able to have their child vaccinated conveniently and for free.

“There’s no reason to think the H1N1 vaccine will be any less safe than the seasonal vaccine,” said Salka. “It was produced using the same process and manufacturers as the seasonal flu.”

Remember the three keys to fighting H1N1, especially for parents:

- Practice/continue reinforcing good hygiene habits – washing hands, coughing and sneezing into a tissue or crook of an elbow, and keeping hands away from your face.
- Get an H1N1 flu shot for your child and yourself when available.
- Be aware of the emergency warning signs if your child does become ill.

For more H1N1 information, visit San Juan Basin Health’s Web site: www.sjbhd.org or flu.gov.; or call La Plata County InfoLine at 385-INFO (4636), press 1 and then ext. 2271. You can also call the Colorado HELPline at (877) 462-2911 for an operator.

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