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Kansas Response to World Health Organization Pandemic Declaration

Today's declaration of a flu pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) comes as no surprise to public health officials in Kansas who have been responding to infections with the 2009 H1N1 flu virus across the state for nearly two months.

"The WHO's action today is an important reminder that this entirely new flu virus is still here," said Dr. Jason Eberhart-Phillips, State Health Officer and KDHE Director of Health. "New cases are still occurring in Kansas as we head into summer, and we have every reason to believe that caseloads will escalate when the regular flu season begins sometime in the fall."

WHO, the global public health agency based in Geneva, today elevated the pandemic phase from a level 5 to a level 6, the highest level on its pandemic alert scale. The decision confirms that the first flu pandemic in more than 40 years is underway in at least two continents.

Cases of the novel H1N1 flu have now been confirmed in 74 countries, with widespread community transmission occurring both in North America and Australia. The declaration of a pandemic is only a recognition of the wide geographic spread of the new virus, not an indicator of the severity of the disease it causes.

"Fortunately most illnesses caused by this virus so far have been relatively mild," Dr. Eberhart-Phillips said. He noted that of 97 laboratory-confirmed cases in Kansas, there have been only seven hospitalizations and no deaths.

"But that relatively benign picture could change as the virus infects more people around the world, and it has more opportunities to mutate or exchange bits of its genetic material with other flu viruses," he added. "The severity of illness it causes could be different in the months ahead."

While the pandemic phase level has been elevated, the Kansas response to the virus will remain the same, Dr. Eberhart-Phillips said. Kansas, in sync with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), responded to cases of H1N1 early on, and health officials are continuing their efforts now to reduce transmission and slow down the spread of the infection.

"Every step we can take to interrupt the spread of this virus buys us time to develop a safe and effective vaccine, the only sure way to protect the public in a full-blown pandemic," Dr. Eberhart-Phillips said. Those steps include careful monitoring of virus activity throughout the state, voluntary isolation of people who are sick with the infection, exclusion of potentially

infectious persons from schools and workplaces, and information sharing with the public so that everyone can protect themselves and people around them.

Dr. Eberhart-Phillips also noted that now is the time for schools and employers to prepare for a potential major outbreak later this year. “School administrators, business owners and other employers need to be thinking now about the continuity of their operations should large numbers of people become ill in the fall,” he said.

As of today, KDHE has identified the following cases of the 2009 H1N1 influenza A virus in 15 Kansas counties. In all cases, the local health departments are following the guidance provided by KDHE when dealing with a confirmed case.

Confirmed Cases – 97 total

- Dickinson County – Two cases involving adults
- Douglas County – Two cases involving an adults
- Ford County – One case involving a child
- Geary County – 25 cases total involving nine adults and 16 children
- Gove County – One case involving an adult
- Johnson County – 11 cases total involving four adults and seven children
- Leavenworth County – One case involving a child
- Morton County – Two cases involving adults
- Ottawa County – One case involving a child
- Pottawatomie County – One case involving a child
- Reno County – One case involving an adult
- Riley County – 23 cases total involving 15 adults and eight children
- Saline County – Eight cases total involving one adult and seven children
- Sedgwick County – Three cases involving children
- Wyandotte County – 15 cases total involving two adults and 13 children

The symptoms of the 2009 H1N1 influenza A virus are similar to the symptoms of seasonal flu and include:

- Fever greater than 100 degrees
- Body aches
- Coughing
- Sore throat
- Respiratory congestion
- In some cases, diarrhea and vomiting

Individuals who experience the above symptoms should contact their health care provider, who will determine whether testing or treatment is needed. There is no vaccine available right now to protect against the 2009 H1N1 influenza A virus, but there are effective treatments available once the infection is diagnosed.

As with any influenza virus, individuals are encouraged to take the following steps to reduce spread:

- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer to get rid of most germs and avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Stay home when you are sick to avoid spreading illness to co-workers and friends.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow or a tissue and properly dispose of used tissues.
- Stay healthy by eating a balanced diet, drinking plenty of water and getting adequate rest and exercise.

It is important to know that the 2009 H1N1 influenza A virus is not transmitted by food. You cannot get this virus from eating pork or pork products. Eating properly handled and cooked pork and pork products is safe.

KDHE has established a phone number for concerned Kansans to call with questions about the 2009 H1N1 influenza A virus. The toll-free number is **1-877-427-7317**. Operators will be available to answer questions from **8 a.m. – 5 p.m. Monday through Friday**. Persons calling will be directed to press “1” on their touch-tone phone to be directed to an operator who can answer questions.

Kansans with questions about the virus can email H1N1fluinfo@kdheks.gov. Information is also available from KDHE at www.kdheks.gov.

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As the state’s environmental protection and public health agency, KDHE promotes responsible choices to protect the health and environment for all Kansans.

Through education, direct services and the assessment of data and trends, coupled with policy development and enforcement, KDHE will improve health and quality of life. We prevent illness, injuries and foster a safe and sustainable environment for the people of Kansas.