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H1N1 swine flu update: 4 p.m., April 30, 2009

As of late Thursday afternoon, Oregon public officials said the number of cases identified as probable H1N1 swine flu remained at one, with additional samples still being tested by the Oregon State Public Health Laboratory.

"Although this case isn't yet finally confirmed as H1N1 swine flu, the likelihood it will be is high," said Mel Kohn, M.D., state public health director in the Oregon Department of Human Services. "We are responding aggressively to stay ahead of the outbreak, including immediately working with people as they are identified as likely having H1N1."

Kohn said final testing of the specimen should be completed within the next few days. Meanwhile, a number of other specimens are being tested, he said.

"This shows the system is working and it reinforces how we are advising members of the public to protect themselves and their families against the spread of disease," Kohn said. "We all should be washing our hands frequently, covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue or sleeve, and staying home if we are ill."

Earlier today, Kohn said the Multnomah County woman believed to have contracted H1N1 swine flu had been in contact with family members who had visited Mexico. She began experiencing symptoms on Sunday, was not hospitalized and is recovering, he said.

He said Oregon expects to receive its first shipment of antivirals this weekend from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "When it becomes necessary to use the state stockpile, we will use it strategically to prevent and slow the spread of this disease," he said. "We will need to conserve the resources in the stockpile so they will be the most useful to people who need them."

People should be tested if they experience flu-like symptoms after visiting a state or country in which H1N1 swine flu has been identified or after associating with someone who has, Kohn said.

Once public health officials identify a probable case, local public health officials interview the affected individual to try to determine the source of the illness and with whom the individual has come into close contact, said Gary Oxman, M.D., health officer for Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington counties. In turn, public health officials notify close contacts that they may have been exposed, he said. "This is what public health does every day," Oxman said.

"We are paying close attention to this because it is a new strain of flu that we haven't seen in Oregon and the United States before," Kohn said. As a result, people have not been exposed to the virus and no vaccine has yet been developed to prevent it.

Kohn said the U.S. is better protected against a massive pandemic than it was in 1918, when thousands of Americans died. He said Americans are generally in better health, the nation's health care system is more sophisticated and antiviral medications are available that weren't then.

"I'm very pleased with the solid cooperation and collaboration we are getting from health care providers, other state agencies and the local public health system," he said.

Although it's unknown how long the outbreak will last, Kohn said, the public health system is prepared for it to be lengthy. "We're probably going to be dealing with this for months, perhaps even a year or two," he said. "It's prudent for us to prepare for this to be a long-term problem."

Kohn said daily updates would be posted on the state's Web site: www.flu.oregon.gov.