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Six Things Every Kansan Should Know About Swine Flu

By now you are probably aware that an outbreak of swine flu has occurred in Mexico, with a few cases now being reported in the United States. You may be alarmed by what you have heard, or you may be wondering why public health authorities are so concerned.

Many of you are asking good questions about swine flu. At this early stage in the outbreak, some questions don't yet have reliable answers. As each day passes we are learning more, and we are becoming more certain about the advice we give.

As of today, here is what we know:

1. This is a new virus, never before recognized in the United States or anywhere in the world. The new virus contains genetic pieces from flu viruses that infect pigs, birds and humans. It appears able to spread among humans like the familiar human flu viruses that circulate in our communities every winter. Because this virus is new, we believe that no one has natural immunity against it. Immunization with the seasonal flu vaccine is not likely to offer protection.

2. Disease caused by the swine flu virus appears to be mild so far. Among the confirmed cases in the United States, only one has required hospitalization. All have recovered, or are now showing signs of recovery. The ability of the virus to cause serious disease may change over time, or it may infect people who are less able to resist it effectively. There are reports of deaths associated with swine flu infections in Mexico.

3. The disease is present in Kansas. As of today, we are aware of two cases of swine flu in our state. One case followed a trip to Mexico. The other resulted from household contact with the returning traveler. State and local public health staff are currently working hard to identify additional cases and provide supporting laboratory work to characterize the extent of the outbreak in Kansas.

4. Swine flu is treatable. While the new virus is resistant to certain anti-viral medications, at the moment it remains sensitive to others. To be maximally effective in shortening the length and severity of illness, these medications should be prescribed by a physician early in the course of infection. As always, rest at home and drinking ample fluids is also essential for a complete recovery.

5. Swine flu is preventable. While there is no vaccine that specifically protects against the new virus, everyday steps that prevent the spread of germs are very effective in reducing the risk of catching this disease. These include washing your hands thoroughly and often with soap and warm water or alcohol-based hand sanitizers, staying at least six feet away from people who are coughing and sneezing, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle with a balanced diet and plenty of rest and exercise. Those who develop flu symptoms must stay home and avoid contact with other people as much as possible for a period of seven days from the onset of illness.

6. We can beat this. Your state and local public health professionals, together with Kansas health care providers, have been preparing and training for the arrival of a new flu virus in our communities for years. Working with colleagues at the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, we will monitor the activity of this new infectious agent and take all the necessary steps to curtail its spread. Your role in this is critical: to remain informed, to consult your health care provider if you become ill, and to follow the advice you receive on ways to protect your community. We will continue to update the KDHE web site (www.kdheks.gov) and encourage you to use it as a resource for swine flu information. Thank you all for your interest and support.

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