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Mass. adult and a child under age 4 die of swine flu

Parents urged to get children vaccinated

By Stephanie S. Daly
Globe Correspondent / November 21, 2009

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State public health officials announced yesterday the death of two people from swine flu, including a child under the age of 4, underscoring the vulnerability that young people appear to have to the unusual virus.

The child is just the second in Massachusetts to die of H1N1, and the first child to die of the virus during this fall's flu season. The first child died in the spring.

"Death due to H1N1 is rare, but it does happen," said Dr. Lauren Smith, medical director of the state Department of Public Health. "I understand that the death of the child is a tragic thing."

Smith urged parents to continue to wash their children's hands, keep their children home if they are sick, and get their children vaccinated for the flu.

The child is believed to be a Natick toddler, according to neighbors who spoke to the family and officials at the scene after an ambulance came to their home earlier this week. At a press conference yesterday, however, Smith said only that the child lived in Middlesex County and would not elaborate.

The second death announced yesterday was that of an adult from Suffolk County age 45 to 64. Smith said the victim had underlying health conditions.

Both of the deaths occurred within the last week. In Massachusetts, 12 people died of H1N1 in the spring and five more recently. Health officials have not identified swine flu victims because of patient confidentiality laws.

Smith said the current rate of hospitalization and mortality from the flu is on par with the normal flu season but that there has been more attention paid because young people are more susceptible to the H1N1 virus. They have no natural immunity to the novel strain, and vaccine production has been behind schedule.

Earlier this month, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that swine flu has killed 540 children across the country since April. Children under 18 accounted for more than one-third of swine flu cases.

Yesterday, federal health officials said that swine flu cases appeared to declining in some parts of the United States. Forty-three states, including Massachusetts, had widespread swine flu cases last week, down from 46 states a week earlier. CDC officials also said reports have been increasing in a few states, including Maine and Hawaii.

The state has received 1 million doses of H1N1 vaccine toward the total planned allotment of 3.5 million. H1N1 vaccine doses will continue to arrive and be distributed through next month and January.

The state will continue to target pregnant women and children for vaccination,



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with the next target group being young adults with chronic health conditions.

Smith also recommended that people get the H1N1 vaccinations as they become available even if it is late in the typical flu season. The flu season typically peaks in the winter.

Globe correspondent Matthew J. Rocheleau contributed to this report. Material from the Associated Press was used in this report. ■

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