

# Active flu season has already started

Local, national health officials warn of impact from seasonal flu virus as well as H1N1 virus

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As autumn approaches, experts at both national and local levels await flu season in much the same way that a hurricane is watched for landfall: no one is sure of just where and how it's going to hit.

The Center for Disease Control is reporting higher-than-normal rates of influenza-like

illness for August and forecasting "a particularly severe flu season."

At the same time, however, the agency has eased its guidelines for management of the H1N1 virus - colloquially

known as "swine flu" - by placing key oversight responsibilities back into local hands.

The American Academy of Family Physicians says that health officials are "battling complacency among the general public and even the press that threatens to derail preparatory efforts."

"There is a misperception that the virus is gone and the threat has disappeared," reads article published last week.

In July, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius uttered a similarly grim-sounding warning about the H1N1 flu: "So far it hasn't been terrifically lethal, but we need to get prepared for what may happen later this fall - we need to be prepared for the worst case scenario."

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—Dr. Tom Spurgat

However, Boerne Walgreens pharmacy manager Erica Kasch reads nothing ominous in corporate directives she's receiving.

"I think they're just stocking up on the flu vaccine and making sure we have enough Tamiflu," Kasch said. "That's pretty much it."

With school starting up next week, BISD Superintendent John Kelly knows that maintaining just the right level of caution will be difficult.

"The CDC and other authorities have changed their advice repeatedly over the past six months," Kelly said. "Thus, we

realize an obligation to also consult local and regional health experts, as well as the CDC."

"The local judgment is also emphasized at present by the U.S. administration," he noted. "They advise against closing schools unless there is a widespread epidemic within that school - and stress local decision making. We will certainly continue to read all CDC material as well as consult with local and regional health authorities."

First reported in the United States only four months ago, the H1N1 virus is currently responsible for "98 percent of all subtyped influenza-A viruses being reported," according to the CDC. With such a high level of incidence, no one can know for sure what effects the H1N1 virus will have on an upcoming flu season that may, in actual fact, have already begun.

Dr. Tom Spurgat of the Boerne Acute Care clinic said he can't remember seeing the flu as active as it has been this summer.

"We're seeing probably one or two cases a day right now and I expect those numbers will increase dramatically with the start of school," Spurgat said. "Normally we'll see a case a week or something like that and the real flu season happens in February." Almost all of the walk-in clinic's flu cases are of the H1N1 strain, Spurgat said.

The seasonal flu vaccine is still not available in most places around town, although Spurgat says his clinic is already administering both the injection and the mist varieties of inoculation.

"Guessing that this is going to be the beginning of a nasty flu season, we have already received our flu vaccine supply and have started vaccinating anyone who would like to reduce their chance of getting the flu," Spurgat said.

However, because the FDA approved this



Photo by Reuben Maltsberger

## Flu Inoculation advice from Dr. Tom Spurgat, Boerne Acute Care:



- The single best way to protect against the flu is to be vaccinated each year as soon as inoculations can be obtained.
- Two types of vaccine are available. The flu shot contains a viral protein that is given by injection and approved for use in people older than 6 months of age. The nasal-spray vaccine, made with weak, live flu viruses, is approved for use in healthy people 2-49 years of age, with the exception of pregnant women.
- While some seasonal vaccines can already be found in local clinics, the Texas Department of State Health Services reports that an H1N1 vaccine will not be available until mid-October.
- The H1N1 vaccine is not intended to replace the seasonal flu vaccine.
- The CDC recommends that children between 6 months and 18 years of age should be vaccinated, as well as pregnant women, people over 50 or suffering chronic medical conditions. The list also includes nursing home or long-term facility residents, health care workers, and caregivers of children younger than 6 months of age.

### H1N1 Quick Facts

From the outbreak of the virus in April and through the end of July, the Texas Department of State Health Services reported:

- 5,371 cases of H1N1 (or Swine flu) virus in Texas
- 28 deaths attributed to the virus
- Cases were confirmed in 128 of the state's 254 counties
- 391 confirmed cases among the 28 counties in TDSHS Region 8
- Two confirmed cases and one possible case in Kendall County

year's seasonal vaccine back in February - before H1N1 ever crept north of the border - Spurgat cautions that the seasonal inoculation is not likely to protect against H1N1. Anyone interested in the H1N1 vaccine will have to wait until the middle of October, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services. Nevertheless, Spurgat says there's hope for those who come down with the "swine flu." If diagnosed within the first 48 hours, the illness can usually be cut short with the help of anti-viral medications such as Tamiflu, he said.

Meanwhile Superintendent Kelly eyes the quickly approaching school year warily, since some BISD kids have already been sick.

"As you may know, we've had a number

of band students (attending pre-school band practice) reporting flu - and staying at home," Kelly said. "It is possible we'll have difficulties as we open the year. In my opinion, we have to take a wait-and-see approach in terms of school closing decisions. We're currently advised not to close schools unless there are a widespread number of cases in a particular school."

Local school officials have every reason to believe that the manner in which flu season happens to strike may present some unexpected challenges.

"I've told people we have to find the fine line between under- and over-reaction," Kelly said.