



Guest Column

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Planning for the Possibility of a Swine Flu Pandemic

Swine flu has reached national headlines. Many are concerned about a pandemic – a widespread outbreak of swine flu in the United States and throughout the world. For many years, health experts have predicted and planned for a pandemic based on: prior pandemics experiences; how the influenza virus mutates; how easily the virus spreads from person to person; how sick a person may get if infected; and how an outbreak might impact families, businesses, and community activities.

The Galveston County Health District (GCHD) has also been planning for the possibility of a pandemic for several years. In addition, GCHD has encouraged and assisted businesses, schools, and others to develop plans on how to prevent the spread of disease and how to deal with the social and economic impacts of a pandemic. While to-date, there are no cases reported in Galveston or surrounding counties, GCHD has activated its pandemic flu plans as follows:

- A website has been developed to provide the public and health professionals with up-to-date information about swine flu activities in Galveston County as well as general information about the disease and its prevention. The website is located at www.gchd.org
- Disease detectives are performing active surveillance by calling hospitals, ER's and private clinics to encourage testing of suspected cases and prompt reporting to GCHD epidemiologist. Prompt reporting will allow GCHD to track suspected cases and to identify the first case of swine flu in our community, which would activate further public health actions.
- Health alerts and advisories have been distributed to the medical community regarding signs and symptoms, how to test for swine flu, effective treatments, etc
- Public health preparedness staff is coordinating with state and federal response officials through daily conference calls and important updates on the development of swine flu cases in Texas and the nation. Any actions taken in

Galveston County will be coordinated with state and federal officials, as well as officials in any neighboring counties.

The plans include working with local medical and business groups as well as with state and federal emergency officials. One component of the plan is to be ready to distribute vaccine and/or antiviral medications to residents of the county. The Health District has identified several sites throughout the county that could be used for public vaccinations or for dispensing antiviral medications. Such mass dispensing would only occur if Galveston County was impacted and there is an effective vaccine/drug available in the federal stockpiles of medications for such emergencies.

If there is a local outbreak, there are many public measures that may be taken to prevent disease spread. One of the most important things to consider at this time is what a person can do to avoid exposure and prevent infection. A complete list can be found at www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/habits.htm, but here are some important tips to reduce your chances of getting infected:

- **Stay calm and stay informed.** Read about swine flu and keep up with its developments. You may contact the GCHD public information officer, Kurt Koopmann, at gchdlist@gchd.org to be added to electronic updates for general public or for health professionals and other officials.
- **Proper Hand Hygiene.** Practice frequent and proper hand washing with plain soap or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- **Do NOT touch your face.** Once your hands are clean, do not touch your face, nose, eyes or lips. Rubbing your eyes and nose provides a freeway for micro-organisms and good breeding ground once they've arrived
- **Cover your cough.** If you must cough or sneeze, cover your mouth with a tissue or your sleeve. Throw the tissue away in a waste basket. Do not leave discarded tissues on your desk or other surfaces. Then, wash your hands thoroughly.
- **Stay home and seek medical care if you're sick.** If you are feverish, achy, have a dry, painful cough or sore throat, go home from school or work and call your health care provider. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick too.
- **Avoid close contact.** Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- **Practice other good health habits.** Get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage your stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat nutritious food. If you have a medical condition, talk to your healthcare provider about what you can do to stay well and avoid infection.

Prevention is our key message. Our goals are to prevent infections in Galveston County and to avoid spread to others. There is much each of us can do as individuals, and as a community, to protect ourselves and minimize any possible impact in our community.

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*(**News Media:** For more information contact Kurt Koopmann, GCHD Public Information Officer, (409) 938-2211)*