

Seasonal flu vaccine will become available at local clinics soon. Feds just recently approved H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine—shots will eventually be available nationwide. Swine flu sickens a younger age group more frequently—the government targets them for vaccination first.

***By Jan Rahn
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Businesses in Perkins County should be prepared for employee absence resulting from the flu this season, according to a presentation made during Perkins County Chamber last Thursday, Sept. 17.

Perkins County Schools are also instituting preventative measures for students and staff. Heidi Wheeler, emergency response coordinator from the Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department who spoke at Chamber said even though vaccine is expected by mid-October, officials are bracing for what they expect to be a worse-than-expected flu season.

Wheeler was part of a recent table-top exercise on flu pandemic preparedness held at the Grant fire hall for law enforcement, hospital staff, business leaders, city and village representatives and volunteer fire department personnel.

The presentation she gave at Chamber reinforced the seriousness of the possibility of a wide-spread influenza season and the importance that everyone play a role in its prevention.

Businesses and employees, along with schools, hospitals and staff must do their part in preventing the spread of both seasonal flu and the H1N1 influenza known as swine flu.

Guidelines developed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Department of Homeland Security are being passed along to employers so they can develop plans to protect the health and safety of their employees and limit the outbreak in the community. The amount of illness that may result from the seasonal flu in addition to the H1N1 influenza cannot be predicted.

The CDC will continuously monitor and disseminate data on the severity of illness.

Employer Recommendations

Two possible conditions exist that employers can prepare for—continuation of the current level of severity of influenza observed during spring and summer; or a more severe outbreak with greater numbers of people becoming ill, requiring hospitalization, or possibly dying.

Employers should plan for an outbreak and implement strategies to protect their workforce while continuing operation.

Businesses should be strict about keeping the work environment safe:

Based on symptoms alone, it will not be possible to determine if an illness is H1N1 influenza, seasonal influenza, or another condition.

All sick people should stay home and away from the workplace. Workers with symptoms of influenza-like illness are urged to stay home until at least 24 hours after a fever has passed.

Employers should allow and encourage sick people to stay home.

Signs should be posted reminding employees of frequent hand washing and covering coughs and sneezes.

To reduce spread, dismissing school, closing child care facilities, cancelling community

gatherings and cancelling travel are things to be considered if there is a large outbreak in the community.

Businesses should plan ahead for how they will operate if there is significant absenteeism from sick workers. Businesses should remember they will also be affected by absenteeism if schools are dismissed or childcare programs close because parents will then have to stay home with their children.

Employers should encourage employees to get vaccinated for seasonal influenza and for the H1N1 influenza when vaccines become available. Different groups are prioritized for the H1N1 flu.

Visit www.flu.gov for information on pandemic influenza. Additional information to assist employers in planning is available at www.flu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/index.html

Vaccine availability

Seasonal flu vaccine available now—H1N1 (swine flu) shots will arrive at a later date.

- Colglazier Clinic: Vaccine is now available and the clinic began giving shots at the Colglazier Clinic on Sept. 15.
- Grant Medical Clinic: A special flu clinic has been scheduled for seasonal flu shots at the Grant Medical Clinic on Wednesday, Oct. 7 and Thursday, Oct. 8 from 9 a.m.-noon and 1-4 p.m. No appointment is necessary.
- Perkins County Health Services: Hospital employees and residents of Golden Ours Convalescent Home and Park Ridge Assisted Living will be able to get a seasonal flu shot beginning Thursday, Oct. 1.