

For Immediate Release

From: The Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

Concerning: World Health Organization raises pandemic level to Stage 6

Date: June 11, 2009

Media Contact: John Robertson, 517-279-9561 x 144

Background: The World Health Organization (WHO) has raised the pandemic threat level for the H1N1 flu to level 6 (out of 6), declaring it a full pandemic — the first global flu pandemic in 41 years. This shift came after a sharp rise in cases in Australia, which reported 1,263 cases on June 11, 2009, as well as rising numbers in Britain, Japan, Chile and elsewhere. The current pandemic flu (H1N1), which has resulted in mostly mild cases, is not more deadly now that it has been declared a pandemic; **rather, the shift reflects the global spread of the disease, not an increase in its severity.**

What is a Pandemic? According to the World Health Organization, it should declare a pandemic once it finds evidence of widespread “community transmission” — meaning more than just travelers, schools and immediate contacts — on two continents. In its latest H1N1 report, the WHO stated that 74 countries had reported 27,737 cases of the disease, and 141 deaths since the outbreak started in April of 2009. The rise in cases in Australia and elsewhere appears to indicate communitywide spread in other world regions. In the U.S., as of June 5, there are more than 13,000 cases of H1N1 flu with 27 deaths. In Michigan as of June 9 there are 418 cases with 2 reported deaths. In our 3 counties (Branch, Hillsdale, St. Joseph), we currently have 2 confirmed cases.

Current Status: The declaration of a pandemic will trigger drug makers to speed up production of a vaccine and prompt governments to devote more money to containing the virus. While international health officials have said the flu appears to be less deadly than the annual bouts of seasonal flu that sweep the globe each year, they have warned that the virus could mutate into a more lethal strain during the Southern Hemisphere’s coming winter flu season.

Locally: In our region, health officials are continuing to work together, sharing resources and information to prevent further spread of this strain of flu. Cases in our 3 counties remain very low (2) but we continue to stress the same precautions to minimize this strain of flu and other communicable diseases that affect us every day.

The Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency continues to stress common sense methods of preventing the spread of this disease including:

- If you think you have the flu or have flu-like symptoms (i.e., fever with either cough or sore throat) - stay home for 7 days after the onset of illness or at least 24 hours after symptoms have ended.
- In communities with numerous reported cases of H1N1 virus infections, persons who are at risk of complications from influenza should consider staying away from public gatherings.
- Cover your cough, sneezes and wash your hand frequently, especially before eating, and do not touch your eyes if you have not washed your hands

Reducing the spread of communicable disease, of which flu is one, is a shared responsibility. We all need to do our part in being aware of our own health and the health of those around us, and making sure we do not unnecessarily put our friends and family at increased risk of disease.

For more information about the flu, you can visit us on the web at www.bhsj.org,
or visit the CDC at www.cdc.gov,
or visit the World Health Organization at www.who.int