

Redlands responds to swine flu

CHANTAL M. LOVELL, Staff Writer
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REDLANDS - One local school and two clubs are taking preventative measures to stop an outbreak of swine flu now that one possible case has been identified.

The San Bernardino County Health Office advised Clement Middle School Friday to close because of one suspected swine flu case.

"The case has not been confirmed yet, but it is probably the swine flu," said Jim Lindley, director of public health for San Bernardino County. "The tests confirmed it was Influenza Type A, and the strand was unidentifiable in the sub-type tests, so we sent it to the State Department of Public Health or the CDC.

"In 90 to 95 percent of cases when sub-types are unidentifiable, it turns out to be swine flu."

The Centers for Disease Control and the California Department of Public Health, which are testing swabs for swine flu, are overwhelmed with possible cases. County and district officials could not say when they expect results for the possible Redlands case.

Clement Middle School notified students and parents over the weekend of the school's closure by automated telephone message and through the school's Web site.

Clement will remain closed until May 11.

"Our health officer strongly advised (Clement) to close for some time," Lindley said. "The length of time varies, but we've been advising a seven-day closure, because the incubation period for the flu is seven days."

School staff will continue working during the week to prepare lesson plans and assign review and enrichment work to students through the school's Web site. Custodial staff has been sanitizing the campus.

"This particular virus only lives on a surface for two hours, but as a precautionary measure, they are doing the normal cleaning, putting a little more emphasis on the flat surfaces throughout the school," said Vincent Christakos, assistant superintendent of business services for the Redlands Unified School District.

This week, students at Clement were scheduled to take the state STAR tests, which will now be postponed.

"The state department of education has given us an extension, so the students will take the tests when they return to school next week," Christakos said.

The same student suspected of having swine flu was also attending the Boys & Girls Clubs of Redlands last week. Both the Hansberger Clubhouse and the Brockton location were closed late Friday afternoon after being notified by the San Bernardino County Public Health Office.

"The Department of Public Health called and said there was a suspected case (of swine flu) and advised us to shut down," said P.T. McEwen, CEO of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Redlands. "We do know the kid was coming to the Hansberger Clubhouse through Wednesday of last week."

Staff handed out a letter to parents Friday, and support staff phoned all families Saturday, informing them there will be no after-school programs. About 100 to 120 children will be affected by the closure, which will last until May 11, according to McEwen.

"We closed in conjunction with Clement Middle School," McEwen said. "We were preparing for this days before it happened, and decided if a feeder school closed, we would follow."

Support staff remain at the club to carry out operational services. The custodial staff has sanitized the facilities.

Those involved in the decision to close the school and clubs stressed such actions are precautionary.

"It's important to note that the (swine) flu has not been shown to be any worse than the regular flu," McEwen said. "The problem really is just that this is a new strand. People are contagious one day before they have symptoms, so they potentially can infect others without knowing."

Officials also encourage people remain calm, but cautious.

"We are managing this as a normal flu," Lindley said. "We aren't taking any extra precautions. It doesn't look like this will turn into anything big. The number of cases in Mexico are already receding. It's not escalating and it's under control."

Jean Rathod, infection prevention manager at Redlands Community Hospital, advised people take normal, sanitary measures to prevent the flu.

"Stay away from people who are, or appear to be, sick; wash hands often for 15 to 20 seconds with warm water and use a towel to dry them; use alcohol-based gel (hand sanitizer); if someone is sick, they should wear a surgical mask and change it often."

With students being out of school all week, and with the absence of one of Redlands' after-school programs, the YMCA of the East Valley was expecting, but has yet to experience, a possible increase in attendance.

"We are ready, willing, and able to accept kids into our after-school programs," said Ken Stein, executive director at the YMCA of the East Valley. "We haven't experienced increased attendance so far. Maybe parents are staying home with their kids, or perhaps they haven't thought of the YMCA as an alternative place for their children to go."

As of Monday afternoon, the Redlands Unified School District had no plans to close other schools.

"We are not aware of the need for any others to close," Christakos said. "We are monitoring students and staff at those schools and are sending anyone who is sick home, so they may be assessed by a doctor who can test for the flu. Right now, we have no plans to close other schools."

E-mail Staff Writer Chantal M. Lovell at clovell@redlandsdailyfacts.com