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UPDATE | Nine possible swine flu cases hit Amherst College, one probable case at Smith

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Two probable cases of swine flu at Amherst College were identified by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), and as of Sunday evening, an additional seven Amherst students and one Smith College student have tested positive for Type-A influenza, or the common flu.

The nine Amherst students are exhibiting mild symptoms which may be H1N1, commonly known as swine flu and are being treated as such, said an updated statement from Amherst College President Anthony Marx on Friday.

Their identities have not been released to maintain confidentiality and the students will be isolated for up to one week, said college's spokeswoman Caroline Jenkins Hanna. All are being contained in the same dormitory room while they are monitored, treated and fed by Amherst College Health Services members. The dormitory in which the students are being housed has not been disclosed.

The Smith student, who was a close contact with one of the ill Amherst students, has been isolated with her own kitchen and bathroom facilities, said a statement on the college's website. Her classroom and residential contacts are being notified, and the MDPH is evaluating whether or not the young woman has swine flu.

None of the cases have been confirmed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) yet, which may take one to two days, Hanna said. If the students do have swine flu, they would be the first to contract the illness in western Massachusetts.

However, "none of the students' cases are considered serious, and all are responding well to treatment," said Marx, "and expected to recover fully," added UMass Chancellor Robert C. Holub in a campus-wide e-mail Thursday night.

No cases have been identified at UMass, though surveillance is ongoing, said the chancellor's e-mail. All UMass campus activities are continuing as scheduled, based on advice from the MDPH and CDC.

"We have been meeting over the past week to determine what we would do if such and such occurred [at UMass]," said University spokesman Ed Blaguszewski on Friday. "There's been a lot of planning, a lot of thinking and a lot of what-if scenarios."

However, Amherst College is taking precautions by cancelling a number of social gatherings, including all parties scheduled over the past weekend.

Attending classes is not considered "high-risk" behavior at this point, Hanna said. For now, all classes will run as normal, though the cancelling of classes is something that is being discussed daily.

A cross-registration program through the Five Colleges, Inc., which includes UMass, Smith, Amherst, Mount Holyoke and Hampshire, allows approximately 4,500 students to enroll at one of the Five Colleges and take courses at any of the other four schools, according to the Five Colleges, Inc. website. However, Blaguszewski said the preventative focus is more on students who live in close quarters with one another – like in a dorm – as opposed to students interacting in the classroom.

Amherst College athletes, who have been screened by medical health professionals, do not have flu symptoms and have been cleared for competition, will participate in scheduled athletic contests. Some club sports – including rugby – have been canceled.

Activities that could potentially involve the sharing of food or cups will not take place.

On Thursday and continuing Friday, the College began installing instant hand-sanitizing stations across campus to supplement existing stations in the dining halls and fitness center. Informational posters from the CDC about proper sanitizing techniques are being hung around campus as well. The College is also asking students with cough and flu symptoms to report to health services, not attend classes, stay in their rooms and limit their visits to public places. The number of students who have visited health services has increased slightly over the past week, though no great increase has been observed since the possible swine flu cases were reported on Thursday, Hanna said.

"After consulting with state and other health officials, we have decided that the campus will continue to operate regularly, while we continue to closely monitor the situation," said Marx.

A task force of representatives from Amherst College Health Services, the dean of students, dean of faculty, physical plant, public affairs, campus police and other offices have been assembled, met Friday morning and will continue to meet to assess the situation as it develops, Marx said.

"Although Dr. Morgan tells us that the flu cases treated thus far on campus have been relatively mild, and that the H1N1 flu strain is not believed to pose a significant threat to healthy adults, the College believes that these precautionary steps are necessary and appropriate," he said.

How the nine Amherst students contracted the illness is "kind of a mystery at this point," said Hanna, and the College's immediate focus is on treatment and prevention.

UMass seniors Nikki Woodward, a biochemistry major, and Mandy Lennox, a psychology major, said they are a little, but not overly, concerned about the potential illness hitting Amherst College, which is less than a mile and a half drive from UMass.

"It will affect me that if I feel sick, I'll start worrying about it more then because I'll think it could be [swine flu]," said Lennox. In the meantime, "I might wash my hands more," Woodward added. Sophomores Chris Reeves, a biochemistry major, and Cindy Hopf, an animal science major, also expressed mild concern.

"It might make me be more conscious about hand washing, but I don't think it's reason for me to freak out," said Reeves. "If [the spread] increases, then I'll worry more."

Anyone with symptoms, or anyone who recently has been in close contact with influenza, is asked to seek medical evaluation. Individuals with weak immune systems are recommended to get pre-emptive care.

Symptoms of swine flu can include fever, lethargy, lack of appetite and coughing. Some have also reported runny nose, sore throat, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Basic prevention measures include using soap and water or alcohol-based sanitizer often to clean hands, coughing or sneezing into a tissue, not sneezing into hands, disposing of used tissues, and keeping hands away from eyes, nose and mouth to reduce spreading germs. Those who experience symptoms are advised to stay home from school or work, and limit contact with others.

On Wednesday, The Boston Globe reported two brothers from Lowell, Mass. who contracted the state's first cases of swine flu after a recent vacation in Mexico allegedly exposed them to the illness. Massachusetts now has seven CDC confirmed cases. On the same day, swine flu caused the first national death – a 22-month-old boy from Mexico being treated in Texas. Nationally, nearly 300 schools, 200 in Texas alone, were closed on Thursday to prevent the illness from spreading further.

The number of CDC-confirmed cases in the U.S. reached 226 on Sunday – up 91 from Wednesday – and appears to be growing, according to the Associated Press (AP). The World Health Organization raised the global alert level of swine flu from four to five out of a possible six on Wednesday. Level six is a pandemic.

Three hundred swine flu cases and 12 deaths due to the virus have been confirmed in Mexico after health officials have tested 679 people so far, said the AP. Mexican health officials had suspected around 170 deaths earlier in the week, but would only confirm 12 on Thursday.

Those who exhibit symptoms are recommended to contact University Health Services' (UHS) Triage Advice Nurse, who can be reached at 413-577-5229 between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., or 413-577-5000 after hours. For federal, state and campus-specific information, visit the UHS website, www.umass.edu.uhs.

A full list of canceled Amherst College events can be found at http://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/health/service/flu/cancelled. Amherst College Health Services can be reached at 413-542-2266 between 8:50 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. When Amherst College Health Services is closed, students can call the campus dispatcher at 413-542-2291 to arrange transportation to UHS.

Massachusetts residents can dial 2-1-1 for basic information about swine flu.

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