

Precautionary measures

H1N1 vaccinations begin; flu widespread, but not exceptional



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Brysen McIntyre, 3, with dad Erik McIntyre, from Vancouver, gets a free H1N1 swine flu vaccination Thursday at Clark College's Child Family Center. Local child care centers received a shipment of 2,890 doses this week.

By **TOMVOGT**
Columbian staff writer

It might have been swine flu that floored Erik McIntyre a few months ago.

It was never confirmed, but McIntyre does know this: He doesn't want his family to go through what he went through.

That's why McIntyre brought his son, Brysen, in for an H1N1 swine flu vaccination Thursday afternoon at the Clark College Child Family Center.

Clark County Public Health started vaccinations at several local child care centers after receiving its initial shipment of 2,890 doses Wednesday.

Doug Cox, spokesman for the incident management team, said 1,000 doses are going to regional health care facilities so staffs can be vaccinated Saturday.

The initial shipment was in the form of the FluMist nasal spray. Brysen got half a dose in each nostril; he'll need a second vaccination in about a month.

"We were planning on getting it done, regard-

Did you know?

■ Seasonal and H1N1 swine flu share several symptoms, according to the flu.gov Web site: All flus can cause fever, coughing, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, headaches, body aches, chills and fatigue. Swine flu symptoms may be more severe, and a significant number of H1N1 cases include vomiting and/or diarrhea.

On the Web:

To learn more, go to www.flu.gov

Schools' absentee rates hold steady

By **LAURAMcVICKER** and **MARISSA HARSHMAN**
Columbian staff writers

Most local schools aren't seeing a dramatic surge in student absences since H1N1 swine flu began circulating through Southwest Washington.

However, Mountain View High School reported an abnormal climb in absentee rates, with 25 percent of students out Tuesday. Of 490 students absent, 75 had swine flulike symptoms, said Evergreen Public Schools spokeswoman Carol Fenstermacher.

That wasn't the norm among other Clark County schools, where officials are still waiting to see how H1N1 could hurt attendance.

School officials in Woodland are monitoring

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less," McIntyre said as he and Brysen, 3, headed out. The fact that Thursday's dose was free, at the site of their child-parent program, made it a can't-miss opportunity.

While McIntyre never learned exactly what sickened him a few months ago, almost all the nation's influenza cases right now are H1N1 swine flu, said Clark County health spokesman Don Strick. According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 99 percent of current cases are H1N1 flu, Strick said.

"Because of that, routine testing for H1N1 is discouraged because it won't change the way people are treated, except for pregnant women and hospital-

izations," Strick said.

According to a government Web site — flu.gov — the vast majority of people who have contracted H1N1 swine flu recover without needing medical care, much like what usually happens with seasonal flu. About 70 percent of those hospitalized with H1N1 have had high-risk medical conditions, including pregnancy, diabetes, heart disease, asthma and kidney disease.

Cases 'not unusual'

Flu patients haven't been an issue at the two local hospitals.

"We're seeing it increase, but slowly," said Ken Cole, spokesman at Southwest Washington Medical Center.

"Two weeks ago, we might have had two or three on a given day. Today, we have 10 or 12 with flu symptoms that have advanced to issues like breathing problems.

"That's not an unusual number" when compared with a typical annual flu season, Cole said.

Legacy Salmon Creek Medical Center has seen even fewer hospitalizations, spokeswoman Kathy Gorman said.

"Since the start of H1N1 in the spring, we've had very few people hospitalized. It's been negligible since May," Gorman said. "For the most part, people have been treated as outpatients."

Several regional hospital systems have restricted their policies on visitors, and Southwest Washington Medical Center is preparing to make similar flu-related limitations. Its flu task force has recommended several restrictions, although staff feedback will be considered before changes are implemented, said Cole, the hospital spokesman.

Recommendations include screening visitors to the family birth center. Visitors will re-

ceive a flier describing disease symptoms; the flier will advise people with those symptoms to forego the visit. From 9 p.m. to 7 a.m., visitors will be restricted to immediate family members."

The Southwest Washington family birth center is the focus of the recommendations because pregnant women are at much higher risk of swine flu complications. But the task force is considering other changes.

"It looks like we will be revising the general visitor policy. The public now is discouraged from visiting if they're sick with symptoms of influenza or other contagious illnesses. That will be changed to 'prohibited,' and signage going up next week will reflect that," Cole said.

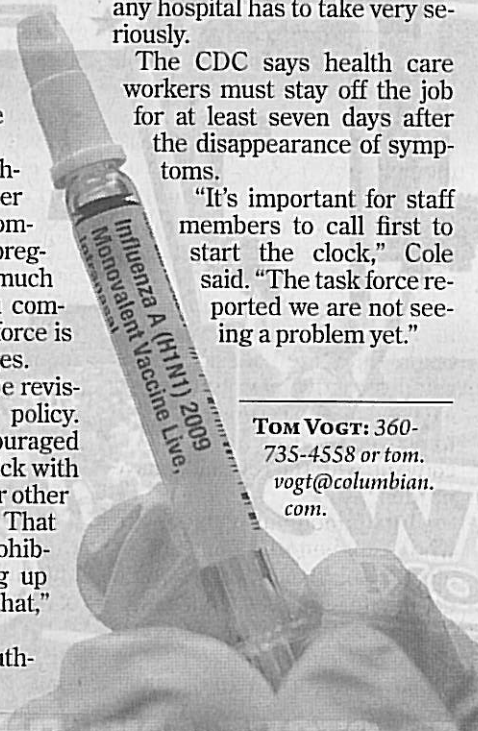
The work force at Southwest Washington Medi-

cal Center doesn't seem to be hit by the flu, and that's an issue any hospital has to take very seriously.

The CDC says health care workers must stay off the job for at least seven days after the disappearance of symptoms.

"It's important for staff members to call first to start the clock," Cole said. "The task force reported we are not seeing a problem yet."

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The Associated Press

Schools:

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attendance records daily but have yet to see a spike in absenteeism. The district is taking a proactive approach to keep the flu bug from spreading through the schools, Superintendent Michael Green said. Teachers and staff are encouraging students to wash their hands regularly and members of the schools' cleaning staff are using antiseptic wipes daily to clear germs from computer keyboards, he said.

If a child does has a fever, he or she is sent home and parents are asked to keep their son or daughter home for at least 24 hours after the fever fades, Green said.

"People should just assume the virus is out there in all public places — not just schools, but everywhere."

Kris Sork
Vancouver Public Schools

Washougal principals are monitoring their schools' absentee rates as well, and so far the numbers are normal for this time of year, Superintendent Teresa Baldwin said. Principals and school nurses are also on the lookout for students with symptoms not typically associated with the seasonal flu, she said.

Fenstermacher said Mountain View typically sees a much lower absentee rate — usually about 10 percent — during the fall season. The recent spike prompted the school's nurse to start a screening process to determine whether sick students' symptoms are consistent with swine flu.

"When the numbers go that high, they go through and ask what the symptoms are," Fenstermacher said. Ruling it as possible swine flu "is a guesstimate," she added. Local health authorities aren't ordering widespread flu testing.

So far, the drop in attendance hasn't affected Mountain View's classes or activity schedule. There also hasn't been a higher

number of teachers or other school personnel out sick, Fenstermacher said.

Clark College has had scattered reports of students and staff with flulike symptoms but not enough to trigger alarm, spokeswoman Barbara Kerr said. To keep illness to a minimum, the college has distributed bottles of hand sanitizer throughout the campus and created an advisory section with H1N1 information on its Web site, she said.

"Nobody's immune to it, but we haven't seen anything widespread," Kerr said.

School officials in Battle Ground are noticing a decrease in the number of students missing classes due to flulike symptoms. In late September, several Battle Ground schools were missing more than a dozen students on any given day. This week, though, those numbers are down to just a handful, district spokesman Gregg Herington said.

Vancouver Public Schools hasn't seen a sharp increase in absentee rates among students

or staff, said district spokeswoman Kris Sork. By that, she means a rate 10 percent higher than the usual absentee rate for this time of year.

School officials do believe, however, swine flu is circulating in schools.

"People should just assume the virus is out there in all public places — not just schools, but everywhere," Sork said.

Since spring, Vancouver school officials began screening students for swine flu, but they declined to release recent numbers of how many are exhibiting swine flulike symptoms.

A spot check of local businesses Thursday indicated that swine flu wasn't significantly affecting employee attendance.

Of several large employers reached for comment, only Educational Service District 112 reported higher-than-normal absenteeism.

Of its 225 main office employees, 24 were either out sick this week or taking care of an ill family member, said Lori Williams, deputy director of school and agency operations.

"During flu season, it's not unusual to see several kids out," Williams said. "What's different this year is the number of staff that's out."

Williams didn't know how many staffers had swine flulike symptoms.