

Other area schools see moderate increase in their number of illness-related absences

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CHARLESTON — For the first two months of the school year, about 90 Eastern Illinois University students showed up at the university's health service complaining about swine flu symptoms. Then came the EIU homecoming celebration the weekend of Oct. 17.

Sheila Baker, the health services's medical director, said more than 200 students have come in just since that weekend. Not only was there a large group of people in town, students' immunity levels were likely affected by lack of sleep and drinking, she said.

"We believe it has made a significant difference," Baker said.

On top of that, flu cases have "just exploded" this week, and the health services is seeing 10 to 15 percent more students than it did last year, she added. EIU ordered 7,000 doses of swine flu vaccine a month ago, but this week the Illinois Department of Public Health said it's supplying hospitals and health departments first, and the university might not get its vaccine until late November.

"It's been very discouraging," Baker said.

Health service tests don't specifically identify swine flu and show only if the flu is Type A or Type B influenza, Baker explained. However, all cases the services has seen are Type A influenza and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says all Type A influenza now is swine flu, she said.

Many college students are part of one category of people at risk for complications from the flu, namely people younger than 24 years old. For now, students can go to vaccination clinics the Coles County Health Department has planned, Baker said.

"We plan for mass vaccination clinics as soon as we get the vaccine," she said.

To help try to limit the flu's spread, EIU is asking that students with flu symptoms go to their permanent homes until they're fever-free without medication for 24 hours, Baker said. For students who can't do that, there are some university apartments where they can stay while they're recovering.

There's also the question of how having the flu will affect a student academically because of missed class time. Baker said the health service gets consent from infected students so instructors can be notified, and the absences can't be counted against them.

Baker said the health service has made those kinds of arrangements for ill students before, but

“not like this,” with the volume of cases and a specific illness causing them.

“It’s always been individuals before,” she said.

Flu concerns also have hit community schools in Coles County.

Mattoon school Superintendent Larry Lilly said absences for the last week were at about 15 percent, about the twice the normal level, and he thinks at least some of those are because of the flu.

“It makes sense for the schools to offer this service,” he said of vaccination clinics the Coles County Health Department is conducting at Mattoon and Charleston schools this week and next.

The Charleston school district’s absence rate was about 4 percent during September and 6 percent so far this month, according to information from the district.

The emergency room at Sarah Bush Lincoln Health Center usually sees about 85 people each day, but in the last few weeks there have been between 125 and 150 people daily, said Joseph Burton, the hospital’s emergency department medical director. However, while as many as half ask if they have swine flu, the vast majority don’t, he said.

People with severe symptoms such as high fever or shortness of breath should see a doctor, but that’s not needed for a lower fever or a runny nose, Burton said.

“Just stay home,” he said. “That’s what we’re telling almost everybody.”

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