

Swine flu at universities –

Cases mild, brief and too few to be considered an outbreak

By Bob LaMendola South Florida Sun Sentinel.com September 9, 2009

Swine flu is spreading on Florida college campuses since classes started last month, sending hundreds to student health centers and forcing a handful of sufferers to change dormitory rooms to protect roommates.

But the rise in H1N1 flu infections had been expected once the fall schedule began, school health officials said today. Few if any of the cases were serious and they do not amount to outbreaks, as has been the case on other U.S. campuses with thousands of cases.

Florida Atlantic University has tallied almost 100 students presumed to have the new strain of H1N1 flu since mid-summer, only one of whom may have gone to the hospital while at home, said Cathie Wallace, director of student health services. Two sick students with roommates at the main Boca Raton campus briefly moved to empty dorm rooms.

"We are seeing students with the flu on a daily basis. We have not seen a huge surge," Wallace said. "It's like it was during the summer. We are seeing most of the cases in our commuter students."

The University of Miami is treating five to 10 students a day with flu-like symptoms, which spokeswoman Margot Winick called a low number and less than expected. Of the few sick students tested, only one in five actually had H1N1 flu, she said. Florida International University in Miami has had only a few cases, spokeswoman Maydel Santana-Bravo said.

The University of Florida and Florida State University are seeing steady trickles of sick students that have kept traffic up in their health centers, school spokesperson said. Students are sent home and told to stay away from others while recovering, but the two big campuses have few if any empty dorm rooms where roommates can go to stay away.

"The students are responsible for themselves," said US spokesman Steve Orlando. "We have 50,000 students, we can't be mom and dad for everyone."

School health staffers give sick students the same advice given to the one-million-plus Americans who have had the flu: Stay home until 24 hours after the fever ends, take fever-lowering pills and avoid spreading the virus by washing hands and covering coughs and sneezes. FAU sends them home with acetaminophen, a mask and instructions, Wallace said.

Tim O'Connor, a spokesman for the Palm Beach County Health Department, said the new cases have not been a surprise because South Florida and the state now have flu on a widespread basis.

"I think it's just teasing us right now," said Barbara Childers, director of nursing at FSU's Thagard Student Health Center. "More will come later."