

H1N1 Could Kill Up to 90,000 in U.S., Report Says

Monday , August 24, 2009

FOX NEWS

The H1N1 flu virus could kill between 30,000 and 90,000 deaths in the United States and "poses a serious health threat" the Obama administration's advisory group on Science and Technology said in a report released Monday.

Deaths would be concentrated among children and young adults, according to the report. In contrast, the typical seasonal flu kills between 30,000 and 40,000 annually — mainly among people over 65.

The report predicts 1.8 million will be hospitalized during the epidemic, with up to 300,000 patients requiring intensive care units.

These patients could occupy 50-100 percent of all ICU beds in affected regions at the peak of the epidemic and would place "enormous stress" on ICU units.

More needs to be done to speed up the "preparation of flu vaccine for distribution to high-risk individuals," otherwise the vaccine campaign — currently scheduled to begin in mid October — will have potentially missed the peak of the epidemic, according to the report.

Monday's report from the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, PCAST, shows a sober assessment of the dangers of a pandemic, but also serves as a pat on the back for a White House preparing for its first public health crisis.

"Based on the history of influenza pandemics over the past hundred years, PCAST places the current outbreak somewhere between the two extremes that have informed public opinion about influenza," states the report. "On the one hand, the 2009-H1N1 virus does not thus far seem to show the virulence associated with the devastating pandemic of 1918-19. On the other hand, the 2009-H1N1 virus is a serious threat to our nation and the world."

This is due to the likelihood that more people will be infected because so few people have immunity to the strain.

As a result, PCAST recommends that the Food and Drug Administration "accelerate a decision about the availability of antiviral drugs for intravenous use." The current expectation is that the vaccine will be available in mid-October.

PCAST says under its model scenario, "the resurgence of the epidemic would start in September and peak in mid-October. If this model is approximately correct with respect to timing, a vaccination campaign would not begin to protect vaccines until well after the epidemic had peaked."

Other recommendations include:

— designating an individual, preferably the Homeland Security Advisor, to be responsible for coordinating all policy development for the 2009-H1N1 response;

— identifying and protecting high risk groups;

— that the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) clarify and strengthen its guidelines for use of antiviral drugs, including for treatment, pre-exposure, and post-exposure prophylaxis etc;

— that the CDC launch a "robust communications plan" prior to September 1 for public messages regarding medical and non-medical interventions.

Despite the long 'to-do' list, the Obama administration has thus far done a good job of preparing for a national outbreak, according to Harold Varmus, PCAST co-chair and President of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center.

"The Federal Government's response has been truly impressive and we've all been pleased to see the high level of cooperation among the many departments and agencies that are gearing up for the expected fall resurgence of H1N1 flu," he said.

PCAST is an advisory group made up of scientists and engineers that advise the President. Earlier this summer, President Obama asked PCAST to evaluate the 2009 H1N1 epidemic and the federal government's response.

Reuters contributed to this report.