

Swine flu estimates differ

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Two leading government healthcare agencies recently presented differing opinions on the effects swine flu is likely to have this fall. One group believes it will lead to up to 90,000 deaths. The other thinks the number will be much lower. The confusion and different viewpoints aside, swine flu is a serious illness and we must work to control its spread.

The President's Council of Advisers on Science and Technology released a report that says that over 50 percent of the population will contract swine flu this season, with up to 1.8 million ending up in the hospital for treatment and up to 90,000 actually dying from the disease.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the most respected health agency in the country - if not the world - doesn't see such a scenario playing out. While the group withheld from stating numbers, they did say that recent statistics show any outbreaks of swine flu will be much milder than the President's Council reported.

Swine flu is a respiratory infection that is caused by a type of influenza viruses. The outbreak of what is called swine flu involves a new strain that's a combination of swine, bird and human influenza viruses. It can spread from human to human. Based on its wide spread, the World Health Organization has declared the 2009 outbreak of swine flu a global pandemic.

Even though leading agencies differ on just how serious this year's infections will be it is important that we all work to keep ourselves healthy and to stop the spread of swine flu. Following basic sanitary rules and common sense will go a long way in ensuring the disease doesn't reach pandemic proportions this flu season. Washing hands thoroughly and often, with soap and water using a hand sanitizer is key. Flu viruses can survive for two hours or longer on surfaces such as doorknobs. If you do feel sick, stay home.

If you are infected with swine flu, you can give it to others starting 24 hours before you develop symptoms and for up to seven days later. Anyone with flu-like illness should avoid other people until at least 24 hours after they are free of fever. People who work or live in spaces where there are lots of people – such as a dorm – should take extra precautions to ensure they remain healthy.

It is unfortunate that government agencies are unable to clearly estimate just how serious swine flu will be this season. But we must not let the confusion deter us from taking our health – and the health of others – seriously. Our efforts can go a long way toward preventing and outbreak.