

Chinese officials warn of possible new flu outbreaks

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China is warning officials to brace for a possible new wave of swine flu infections as the country enters the busy Lunar New Year travel period.

Tens of millions of Chinese take to the rails, roads and air during the most important holiday of the traditional calendar, creating crowded conditions ideal for the spread of the virus. The holiday period this year runs from late January into February.

“During the 2010 New Year and Lunar New Year period, various factors such as spring travel, tourism, shopping and other group activities will increase the risk of H1N1 infection,” the Health Ministry said in a bulletin posted on its Web site yesterday. “Disease prevention measures must remain rigorous.”

China has already taken severe measures seen to control the spread of the virus, quarantining large numbers of travelers and setting up temperature checks at virtually all schools and public buildings.

Experts differ on how effective those steps have been and the ministry said China, with 1.3 billion people, had recorded more than 120,000 cases of infection by the end of last month, including 648 deaths.

It said 447, or 69 percent, of those deaths were recorded last month alone, a spike attributed partly to a rise in virus fatalities among pregnant mothers from 8.8 percent of November's total to 18.6 percent of all the deaths for last month.

People with chronic illnesses and the obese also succumbed to the disease in larger numbers last month, the ministry said.

Underscoring the striking rise in the death toll last month, new H1N1 cases for the month accounted for only 23 percent of the total, it said.

However, the ministry said it had not discovered mutations in the virus or the emergence of drug-resistant strains, appearing to put much of the monthly increase in deaths down to seasonal factors.

While it said numbers of cases have fallen strikingly in Beijing, Shanghai and other major cities, rural areas — where medical resources are typically poorer and emergency response times slower — will likely suffer the brunt of a renewed outbreak, the ministry said. Rural schools should especially be on guard, it said.

It cited monitoring, prevention, immunization and treatment as the key strategies to contain the virus, with almost 50 million people having received the H1N1 vaccine already.

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