



UN health agency urges countries to remain prepared for H1N1 virus



WHO staff prepare boxes of antiviral drugs to treat the H1N1 virus for dispatch to countries [File Photo]

3 November 2009 – The United Nations health agency today reiterated that countries need to remain prepared for the H1N1 virus, noting that the world has not yet hit the peak influenza season between January and February when more cases are expected.

“It is completely expected that they will be seeing more influenza cases at this time, and that they will continue to see more,” Gregory Hartl, spokesperson for the World Health Organization (**WHO**), told a news conference in Geneva.

An H1N1 update issued by the agency last week indicated that large parts of North America and parts of Europe are already over what WHO calls the epidemic threshold, so there is substantial influenza activity and more is expected.

Mr. Hartl said the indication is that this will become widespread across the Northern Hemisphere and temperate zones as these areas move forward through the late autumn and winter.

In a related development, WHO has **deployed** a team of experts to Ukraine, following a request from the Government, which has recorded more than 250,000 cases of influenza-like illness.

“As the pandemic virus has rapidly become the dominant influenza strain worldwide, it can be assumed that most cases of influenza in Ukraine are caused by the H1N1 virus,” the agency said in a statement.

The team will begin initial work in the Lviv region, where reported numbers of cases showing severe manifestations of acute respiratory illness have been especially high.

While many questions remain to be answered, WHO stated that the outbreak in Ukraine may be indicative of how the virus can behave in the Northern Hemisphere during the winter season, particularly in health care settings typically found in Eastern Europe.

Despite concerns about the side effects of the H1N1 vaccine, WHO said it remains one of the best tools available to fight the virus.

"It has already been administered to hundreds of thousands of people. And so far we have not seen any severe side effects, and the number of side effects or adverse events, as we would call them, from this vaccine is in line with what we would expect from a seasonal flu vaccine," said Mr. Hartl.

"Remember this vaccine is no different from any other vaccine in the sense that all vaccines will on rare occasions produce adverse events," he noted, pointing out that the advantages of getting vaccinated far outweigh the risks at this point.

As of 25 October, there have been more than 440,000 laboratory confirmed cases of pandemic influenza H1N1 worldwide and over 5,700 deaths reported to WHO.

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