

First flu vaccine batch produced

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Swiss pharmaceutical giant Novartis said it was making faster than expected progress on the production of a vaccine against swine flu.

The announcement came after the World Health Organisation (WHO) said that swine flu had now become a "pandemic", the first in 41 years.

Novartis said 30 governments had already requested vaccine ingredient against the virus.

"Novartis has successfully completed the production of the first batch of influenza A(H1N1) vaccine, weeks ahead of expectations," the company said in a statement, referring to the virus by its technical name.

WHO Director General Margaret Chan declared a pandemic based on the rapid global spread of the A(H1N1) virus but noted that for most people affected the disease was mild and they made a full recovery.

The WHO expected a vaccine against swine flu to be ready in September. Novartis used a cell-based manufacturing technology at its plant in Marburg, Germany, which "cut weeks off the time required to begin vaccine production." The technology would also allow for faster full-scale production of the vaccine for the markets, once it was ready.

The first batch would be used for pre-clinical evaluation and testing and was also being considered for use in clinical trials, Novartis said. The Basel, Switzerland-based company received a seed of the virus from the United States' Center for Disease Control.

It plans to start clinical trials in July and said it expected licensing in the autumn of 2009.