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Two-year-old Javier Sanchez has his temperature checked before he and his family are allowed to enter the North County Health Services clinic in San Marcos on Tuesday due to the high flu risk.

(Photo by Jamie Scott Lytle - staff photographer)

REGION: County discourages ER trips for flu testing

By COLLEEN MENSCHING - cmensching@nctimes.com

SAN MARCOS ---- The county's top health official issued a plea Tuesday asking residents to stop visiting emergency rooms just to be tested for the H1N1 flu strain, also called swine flu.

"Our local emergency departments are being severely impacted with people bringing in children to be tested," San Diego County Public Health Officer Wilma Wooten said in a written statement. "Only those individuals that develop complications from influenza-like illness should be evaluated by their primary care providers."

Wooten's plea came as two North County health clinics dealt with a doubling and tripling of patients fearful they or their children might have been exposed to the virus.

The region's two main hospitals did not seem to be experiencing the same emergency room crunch. Andy Hoang, spokesman for Palomar Medical Center in Escondido, said Tuesday the hospital hasn't been overrun by flu patients.

"We've seen a slight increase in people coming into the emergency department, but nothing too unusual," he said.

Tri-City Medical Center officials said last week they hadn't seen a surge. They could not be reached Tuesday.

Primary care clinics continued to see more patients than usual on Monday and Tuesday.

Nurses for North County Health Services in San Marcos delivered curbside care Tuesday, greeting patients by taking their temperatures, asking questions about how they were feeling and, in some cases, fitting them with face masks.

The outdoor triage station was part of the clinic's response to concerns about swine flu. The clinic saw 171 walk-in patients Monday, about double the average, after last week's announcement that Mission Hills Middle School in San Marcos was closed because of concerns about influenza, clinic officials said. The school was scheduled to reopen Wednesday.

"As the volume increased and the symptoms became more concerning, we didn't want patients with a fever or high flu risk in with the rest of the people in the waiting room," said Dr. Kevin Ellis, chief medical officer for the 10-clinic system.

Patients with the greatest likelihood of flu infection were given a face mask Tuesday and sent directly to an exam room.

The Vista Community Clinic was in the same boat last week, said spokeswoman Jenny Jones.

"Last week, we saw about three times the normal amount of walk-in traffic," Jones said. "This week, it's down slightly, somewhere around double."

Though Vista Community Clinic patients were being evaluated before entering the clinic last week, that hasn't been necessary this week, she said.

Ivory Garcia, 5, waited at North County Health Services on Tuesday morning with a face mask that covered her mouth and hooked behind her ears.

Ivory's mother, Alma Garcia, said she appreciated the precautions the clinic was taking.

"It makes everyone feel secure," said Garcia, who made an appointment when her daughter and 6-month-old son started coughing and running fevers. "I think it's just regular flu that my kids have, but I want to make sure."

Ellis said there is no doubt the swine flu is highly contagious.

The good news, he said, is that the flu doesn't appear to cause serious illness in the vast majority of people.

Also good news, at least for the San Marcos clinic's patients, is that the clinic does have the medication used to treat influenza.

"But we have written very few prescriptions for it," Ellis said.

He said that's not because the medication is expensive and supplies are limited, both of which are true.

"Most of the reason is that people just aren't having very severe symptoms," Ellis said.

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