

University responds to Swine Flu

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In response to several influenza-like illnesses on campus, University of Richmond officials are informing students and staff about their responsibilities if an outbreak of H1N1, also known as the swine flu, occurs.

Three such students – residents of Gray Court, South Court and North Court – developed influenza-like illnesses last weekend. In addition to severe headaches, they had sore throats, body aches, fevers, chills and were bothered by loud noises and bright lights.

“It feels like someone’s eating my brain with a spoon,” the Gray Court student said about his symptoms.

In an e-mail to Richmond students, Steve Bisese, vice president for student development, recommended – but didn’t require – that students sick with influenza-like illnesses return home if they live within five hours of Richmond and don’t require public transportation to get there.

Otherwise, the e-mail said, students should stay in their dorm rooms for at least 24 hours after their last fever and should wear surgical masks when their roommates are present. Sick students can also request to have meals delivered to their rooms.

Lynne P. Deane, medical director at the Student Health Center, said it would be easier to heal with your family to take care of you.

“It’s okay to go home if you can, and you want to,” she said.

Residence Life will soon be prepared to support those who cannot go home. Patrick

Benner, Richmond College associate dean, sent an e-mail Monday to all Richmond and Westhampton College resident assistants and head residents to notify them of a mandatory meeting Sept. 4 about H1N1.

Deane, who has worked at the university for 18 years, noted that seasonal influenza is typically prevalent from November to early April.

“It appears that the students aren’t getting sicker,” she said. “They’re just not used to getting sick around this time.”

The Gray Court student went to the health center on Thursday and was told to drink fluids and rest. He returned Friday and was given Ibuprofen. By Saturday, his symptoms had worsened drastically, so he and the South Court student went together to Patient First – a health clinic in Carytown. The North Court student also went to Patient First on Saturday.

After being tested for influenza, the students received a clinical diagnosis of their illness as H1N1 influenza from their physician. A clinical diagnosis is a “diagnosis of exclusion” and is not based on test results alone, but rather, the doctor’s deductive reasoning, Deane said.

The Virginia Department of Health tested segments of the Virginia population last spring to determine whether people had H1N1 influenza – an effort meant to gauge where the virus was present in Virginia.

Independent care providers, including the health center and Patient First, do not currently perform comprehensive diagnostic testing. The only out patient test for influenza is the "rapid influenza A test," which can determine whether someone has influenza, but cannot specify the strain, Deane said.

After their diagnosis, the two Richmond students returned to campus and university officials told them to remain in the South Court student's room, they said. The South Court student's two roommates temporarily relocated off campus.

"We're not allowed to see anyone or go anywhere except the bathroom," the Richmond students said. "People treat us like lepers."

The Westhampton student was able to return home for the week.

Beginning Saturday, a nurse at the health center called the students several times to see how they were feeling. The students' biggest complaint was that the health center is closed on weekends.

"It's not like people don't get hurt or sick on weekends," the Richmond students agreed. "It's absurd. They should always be open."

The Westhampton student agreed, saying: "Swine flu sucks. I am nervous about missing class but I don't want to contaminate the whole campus."

Steve Allred, provost and vice president for academic affairs, has asked the faculty to be more lenient in giving extensions on assignments for sick students, Deane said.

It can take up to a week to recover from an influenza-like illness, she said. Until people can get vaccinated, Deane and Bisese urged everyone to take simple precautions including washing hands, covering coughs and refraining from sharing utensils and cups. They also urged that students seek medical attention in the event of flu-like symptoms, such as fevers of more than 100 degrees, sore throats or coughing.

According to Deane, pregnant women and people under 24 years old are considered "at-risk" for contracting H1N1 influenza. Older people could have been exposed to components of the virus, so they have developed a greater immunity, she said.

Bisese recommended consulting the health center for continued updates about the virus and said more hand sanitizers had been ordered and would be dispersed around campus.

Staff members at the health center have ordered surgical masks and are waiting for updates from the Centers for Disease Control on the H1N1 vaccine, which will be provided by the government free of charge, Deane said.

The Virginia Department of Health expects to begin immunizations among "at-risk" groups after receiving the H1N1 vaccine in October, according to a press release from Gov. Timothy Kaine. The Virginia Department of Health should have enough vaccine to immunize all who wish to protect themselves against this strain of influenza.

Colleges and universities are vulnerable to outbreaks because of close living, learning and social conditions, and frequent travel to and from campuses, according to the health center's Web site. Deane said colleges and universities across the country expected influenza-like illnesses, including H1N1 influenza, to spread this fall.

At the University of Kansas, where approximately 340 students (1 percent of the student body) are suspected of having H1N1 influenza, university officials have asked students to remain in their rooms if they become ill. Students there are also encouraged to work from their rooms and are provided with meal service. At Emory University, officials have taken the step of isolating students with H1N1 influenza in a separate dormitory.

Richmond has developed a hotline that students, parents, faculty and staff can call if they have any questions or concerns about H1N1: the local phone number is 804-289-8847 and the toll-free number is 1-866-920-5461. It will be open from 8:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. through this Friday. A permanent schedule has not yet been determined.

"We can't stop influenza from spreading on our campus," Deane said. "It's here and it's going to be here – but we can do as much as we can to mitigate the circumstances.

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