

Still too early to declare swine flu pandemic over: WHO

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It is too soon to decide whether to declare the H1N1 pandemic over, World Health Organization officials said Thursday.

While the number of infections and deaths are falling in Canada and the U.S., "that's still not true for the entire Northern Hemisphere," and it is impossible to know now whether the spring will bring a third wave of infection, Dr. Feiji Fukuda, special adviser to the WHO director-general on pandemic influenza said in a press briefing.

Eight months into the first flu pandemic of the 21st century, "it's clear that it continues to evolve and pose new challenges and raise new concerns, and that we continue to face ongoing uncertainties about the pandemic," Dr. Fukuda said.

"In the face of this, WHO strongly emphasizes that continued global co-operation is really the essential basis for fighting this pandemic, and not just this pandemic, but also future global public health challenges."

Most flu activity is concentrated in the Northern Hemisphere, where activity levels are "up and down," depending on the region, Dr. Fukuda said.

"Overall, it's too early to say whether activity is peaking in the Northern Hemisphere, and, at this point, it is also not possible to predict what we are going to be seeing in the spring time."

And while new estimates suggest H1N1 is, overall, no more deadly than regular seasonal influenza, Dr. Fukuda warned that it is premature to declare how H1N1 will stack up against past pandemics.

This week, the University of Minnesota's Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy reported that U.S. government officials have estimated that the case fatality rate for H1N1 -- the percentage of people who get infected and die from it -- is 0.018%, "about 100-fold lower than the two% CRF in the pandemic of 1918-19."

The case fatality ratio -- the proportion of people with the disease who will die from it -- of regular seasonal flu is pegged at around 0.1%.

"From the very beginning of the pandemic we have pointed out repeatedly that we don't really know what the future is going to bring," Dr. Fukuda said. "We still haven't fully gone through the pandemic, and it is possible there could be unexpected events that occur as we continue to go through.

"It is quite possible to have a pandemic on the milder side, and if we are experiencing that, and the number of serious cases is kept down, then it's something which we should all be thankful," Dr. Fukuda said.

He said WHO will seek "the best possible technical and scientific assessments of where we are" and consult with other bodies before deciding when to declare the pandemic over.

More than 150 million doses of vaccine have now been distributed in about 40 or more countries. So far, no unexpected safety issues have emerged, Dr. Fukuda says.

He also said there is nothing to suggest H1N1 is becoming widely resistant to the flu drug, Tamiflu, despite reports of 96 Tamiflu resistant viruses among several countries.

"We do not see widespread resistance to oseltamivir [Tamiflu] anywhere," he said.

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