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Military monitors swine flu with focus on protecting force

By Donna Miles

American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Defense Department is monitoring the swine flu situation closely, with its primary focus on protecting the military population, a senior Pentagon official said today.

As the Department of Health and Human Services leads the U.S. effort, the military is posturing itself to respond if required, Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman told reporters today.

"We certainly have a number of contingency plans for dealing with health incidences like this, because our primary goal is preservation of the fighting force," he said. "So we obviously have plans and take measures to ensure that we can preserve the fighting strength of the military in the event that there should be a greater crisis with respect to a health situation like this."

Two prescription anti-viral drugs, relenza and tamiflu, already are standard stock at U.S. military treatment facilities, and larger quantities are stockpiled at several sites in the United States and overseas, Whitman said.

President Barack Obama told the National Academy of Sciences today the emerging incidence of swine flu in the United States "is obviously a cause for concern and requires a heightened state of alert, but it's not a cause for alarm."

The Centers for Disease Control has confirmed 40 cases of swine flu virus infection in the United States in California, Kansas, New York City, Ohio and Texas. Greater cases of infections have been reported internationally, particularly in Mexico.

Obama said HHS has declared a public health emergency only "as a precautionary tool to ensure that we have the resources we need at our disposal to respond quickly and effectively." HHS, the CDC and the Department of Homeland Security will provide the American people regular updates about steps being taken and precautions that may be required, he said.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management Director John Berry distributed CDC guidelines for preventing the spread of swine flu to the federal work force. Berry also distributed guidance for federal agencies to protect their work forces and the public and to ensure continuity of operations in the event that they must institute their already-prepared pandemic influenza preparedness plans.

CDC recommends the following actions people can take to stay healthy:

-- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.

-- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners also are effective.

-- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread that way.

CDC also recommends avoiding close contact with sick people, particularly if they are coughing or sneezing, and to stay home if you're sick to avoid infecting others.

For more information on response to the flu outbreak, visit the CDC Web site at:
www.cdc.gov/swineflu/?s_cid=swineFlu_outbreak_001



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