On Thursday, April 30, The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment confirmed two cases of swine flu, also known as the H1N1 virus, in Colorado. Since then, several more cases have been reported, all in the Front Range area.

Local health officials, departments and districts are reporting they are prepared in the event of the swine flu spreading to Northeast Colorado. Melissa Memorial Hospital administrator John Ayoub said the hospital has received the antiviral drugs being used to help treat symptoms of the swine flu.

He also noted they have masks available for those who would like to use them, as well as sanitizers. He welcomes those with questions about the swine flu and/or the hospital's preparations for it to call him at 854-2241.

Since the beginning of the H1N1 virus outbreak in the U.S., many schools around the country have closed to prevent its spread. Holyoke School Supt. Stephen Bohrer said the Re-1J district is prepared with its own plan of action that is in conjunction with the Northeast Colorado Health Department and other agencies.

He added himself, Kim Young and Robert Jacobs have all attended several meetings over the past three years in preparation for a possible pandemic of bird flu or other dangerous viral outbreak.

In addition, the state health department has provided the following guidelines for schools and day-care centers:

—Watch for the signs and symptoms of H1N1 illness, which are similar to those for seasonal flu: fever greater than 100 degrees F, sore throat, cough, stuffy nose, chills, headache and body aches, fatigue and possibly vomiting and diarrhea.

—If a student comes to school or day care with these symptoms, he or she should be sent home and remain there until 24 hours after the symptoms have resolved.

—Students with mild symptoms should recover at home, and the parents should be given instructions to contact the child's medical provider if the symptoms worsen or for further advice.

—If a parent or guardian can't pick up the child right away, the child should be kept away from other students.

—Day-care facilities, schools and/or districts should assess the situation in their own communities and work with their local public health department and the state health department regarding any decisions to close facilities.

—The 2008-09 seasonal flu vaccination does not provide protection from H1N1 influenza.

—Schools and day-care facilities should encourage students to practice prevention strategies such as routine hand washing, covering coughs and sneezes, avoiding others with respiratory illness and staying home if they're ill.

Beginning Monday, May 4, the state stopped reporting information about travel history of any confirmed cases. There is evidence H1N1 is circulating in the United States and Colorado. Individuals do not need to have traveled to Mexico or another area of the U.S. to have been exposed to the virus.

"It's important to understand that, at this time in the United States, the H1N1 flu is acting just like seasonal flu," said Dr. Ned Calonge, the state's chief medical officer.

"It is a relatively mild disease, though we expect, as with seasonal flu, to see a spectrum of illness. We continue to ask all individuals with mild flu-like illness to stay home. This is regardless of travel history. Children and adolescents with fever should not go to day care or school. Adults with fever should not go to work until their symptoms resolve. Individuals with severe illness, such as difficulty breathing, should contact their health-care provider."

The symptoms of H1N1 flu in people are similar to the symptoms of seasonal flu and may include fever greater than 100 degrees F, sore throat, cough, stuffy nose, chills, headache and body aches and fatigue. Some people have reported diarrhea and vomiting associated with H1N1 flu.

The department advises those who experience influenza symptoms to stay home for seven days after onset of symptoms, or at least 24 hours after symptoms have resolved, whichever is longer.

The state health department also encourages people to take these personal precautions to decrease their chances of getting the flu:

—Wash your hands frequently.

—Cover your sneezes and coughs.

—Avoid others with respiratory illnesses.

One of the first cases in Colorado was contracted by a baggage handler at Denver International Airport. This is a reminder that there are potential exposures in public places. Frequent hand washing or the use of hand sanitizers can protect people who are interacting in public places and prevent the spread of illness. H1N1 flu is passed from person to person, Calonge said, and is not contracted from pigs or by eating pork.

“There are other lab specimens from patients in the pipeline that may confirm additional cases of H1N1 flu in the days and weeks to come,” said Calonge. “If there is evidence of a cluster of H1N1 flu cases that would warrant protective public health measures, we are prepared to employ social distancing measures that would help protect people from coming in contact with individuals who may be contagious.”

This is a rapidly evolving situation, and the state health department is asking people to be alert for changes in its guidance as it learns more, available on the department Web site at www.cdphe.state.co.us/.