

# Two flu deaths reported in Fresno County; children filling ERs

By Barbara Anderson

David Luchini, assistant director of the Fresno County Department of Public Health, demonstrates some tips and good habits toward warding off the flu virus. [Related story](#) BARBARA ANDERSON — THE FRESNO BEE

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## Top three flu prevention tips

- Wash hands often with soap and water
- Cough into sleeve or tissue
- If ill, stay home from work or school



Two men have died of complications from the flu in Fresno County, and children with high fevers, coughs, runny noses and sore throats are packing the emergency department at [Valley Children's Hospital](#) in Madera County.

The children's hospital is seeing about 480 patients a day in the emergency department and about 80% of the patients have flu symptoms, said Dr. Shehma Khan, assistant director of the department. "I don't think a pediatric emergency department in the whole country is seeing these kinds of numbers."

And the surge of patients likely will continue. School absenteeism because of the flu is on the rise. Fresno Unified School District nurses saw more children with flu-like symptoms this week and Clovis Unified reported an above-normal increase in absences in parts of the district.

"It does appear we are in the thick of the flu season," said Clovis Unified spokeswoman Susan Sawyer Wise.

The two [Fresno County](#) flu-related adult deaths reported Tuesday are the first this influenza season. Last year, the county had 22 deaths.

Both men who died this month had chronic medical conditions that increased their risk of having flu complications, said David Luchini, assistant director of the county's Department of Public Health.

One of the men was in his 40s and the other in his 50s, Luchini said. Both were hospitalized. The county is notified of flu deaths and admissions to hospital intensive care units of adults who are younger than 65. As of Tuesday, 10 people had been hospitalized this flu season, including the two men who died.

Luchini said one of the men had not been vaccinated for the flu; it was unknown if the other had received a flu shot. While this year's vaccine is only 23% effective against the prominent [H3N2 flu strain](#), Luchini said it can reduce the severity of the illness, if not prevent it completely, and he encouraged people to be immunized.

The identities of the two men who died were not released by health officials who are constrained by privacy laws, but Stephanie Franco of Fresno, said one of the deaths was her uncle, Juan "Johnny" Gonzalez.

Gonzalez, 40, had an asthma attack and called an ambulance when he had trouble breathing three weeks ago, Franco said Tuesday. He was admitted to the intensive care unit at [Community Regional Medical Center](#) and tests

showed he also had influenza, she said. He died Jan. 16, said Franco.

Her uncle did not get a flu shot, Franco said. He worked in construction but did not have health insurance. “The flu shot was just another bill — and he doesn’t like needles,” she said. “He just never got around to it.”

Family members were notified by the health department that they should be vaccinated, Franco said. “Everyone is getting a flu shot today,” she said. So far, only her 10-year-old son has had flu symptoms. He had a high fever and she took him to the hospital Tuesday. He was given Tamiflu, an anti-viral medication, she said.

Luchini said Tuesday that people with flu symptoms should contact their doctors about possible treatment with anti-viral medications.

Khan, the Valley Children’s Hospital doctor, said the medications can work. “I have never had the flu, or fluish symptoms, but this year I came down with the flu about two weeks ago,” he said. “I started Tamiflu and it really did help.”

He said many children can be treated at home for flu symptoms — fever, coughs, runny noses, congestion and muscle pain. However, children who are having difficulty breathing or shortness of breath, and who are not eating or drinking at all, should be brought to the hospital, he said. The same advice applies for children who have symptoms that last longer than five days without improvement and those who have underlying medical conditions, such as asthma, seizures or heart problems.

Flu season in the central San Joaquin Valley can peak in February. In addition to the uptick of patients at Valley Children’s Hospital, other health providers are beginning to see more influenza cases. At [Saint Agnes Medical Center](#) in northeast Fresno, earlier this month doctors had about five patients a week. Last week, they had 18 flu patients, said spokeswoman Kelley Sanchez.

Saint Agnes staff encourage people to get vaccinated, Sanchez said. They also are emphasizing prevention, such as asking anyone with flu-like symptoms to wear a mask while inside the hospital, restricting visitors and supplying hand-washing stations in several locations.

Contact Barbara Anderson: [banderson@fresnobee.com](mailto:banderson@fresnobee.com), (559) 441-6310 or [@beehealthwriter](#) on Twitter.

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