

Egypt develops H1N1 flu vaccine for 2011

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Egypt's Health Minister Hatem el Gabali

Egyptian Health Minister Hatem el Gabali announced that Egypt is developing its own vaccine against H1N1 swine flu for production in 2011 and, in the meantime, will import vaccines to inoculate school children and key public workers

Experts

fear a flu pandemic could have a devastating impact on Egypt, a country of 77 million people who mostly live in the densely packed Nile Valley. Many are in Cairo's crowded slums.

Late on Sunday, Egypt's Health Minister said that Egypt, already hard hit by the more deadly H5N1 bird flu virus, has found about 1,030 cases of H1N1 flu, widely known as swine flu, and three people have died from the virus.

"We have a plan to produce the first batch (of Egypt's H1N1 flu vaccine) by April 2011," Gabali said, speaking after a talk about healthcare reform.

A 35-strong team of experts had been assembled from around Egypt to develop the vaccine, the minister told Reuters.

"We are working now in the lab," he said. "They (the team) were people working in independent institutions, around Egypt. They have trained overseas but they have not worked together as a team. They have the skills to develop the vaccine."

"The production (of) the first batch will be about 6,000 units and it will be tested for efficacy around the second quarter of 2011," he said.

Output from the factory, to be built in Sixth of October City on the outskirts of Cairo, would meet demand in Egypt but

could also supply other countries in Africa, he said.

Other countries, including developing nations, are working to produce their own vaccines, but Egypt has not so far been mentioned among them by the World Health Organisation.

"We are working closely with the WHO and they want us to expand our capacity and we will do that," Gabali said.

In the meantime, Gabali said Egypt had contracted to buy about 5 million vaccines and requested that the WHO provide 15 million from its stock, with an additional 5 million vaccines coming from the private sector.

"My target is to vaccinate all the students, which are about 20 million, and then the rest of the 10 million will be those in critical jobs that affect the public life daily," he said.

He said the focus would be school children from kindergarten age to secondary school.

WHO said Monday about 100 low- and middle-income nations would receive H1N1 flu vaccines donated by firms such as GlaxoSmithKline (GSK.L) and Sanofi (SASY.PA). Vaccines could be sent as early as next month, it said.

Egypt has stepped up surveillance at airports to detect anyone arriving with H1N1 flu and put in place measures to trace them if they fall ill during their stay. It has also campaigned to improve hygiene at schools, which opened late this year.

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