Statement from Otis W. Brawley, M.D., chief medical officer, American Cancer Society

Statement on the American Cancer Society Relay For Life events and swine flu

Atlanta 2009/05/01 -“The American Cancer Society is in the midst of our largest annual fundraising event, Relay For Life, which takes place in more than 5,000 local communities in the U.S. and 20 other countries. We are closely monitoring the swine flu situation to determine if we need to make any alterations in our event plans. We are following the lead of state and local health authorities and other agencies to guide our course of action regarding our Relay events. These local public health experts consult with the U.S. Public Health Service and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and offer the most up-to-date information and guidance. In addition, we are in constant communication and dialogue with our local community volunteers to discuss their individual upcoming local events.

“We encourage people to approach this public health threat with concern and caution, not panic. It is important to understand that infections of any kind are a special concern for individuals during cancer treatment. That’s because certain treatments, like chemotherapy, can weaken the immune system and make it harder for the body to fight off germs. Relay For Life is attended by cancer survivors currently in treatment and as such, we are making decisions based on what is best for the health of our communities.

“At this time, we have decided to postpone a small number of selected local Relay events based on confirmed cases of swine flu and guidance from the local public health authorities to delay the event until a later, more suitable time:

“Because cancer patients undergoing treatment need to be particularly cautious about exposure to other diseases, below are some common sense steps to help reduce the chances of infection:

- Avoid large crowds of people.
- Avoid shaking hands with others.
- Stay away from anyone with a fever, flu, or other infection.
- Stay away from small children who spend their days in group environments like daycare or school; germs spread easily in these environments.
- Wash your hands with warm water and soap after using the bathroom, blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
- If you can't wash your hands often, use an alcohol-based sanitizing gel.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and put your used tissue in a wastebasket right away.
- If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your elbow or upper sleeve, not your hands.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth. Germs spread that way.
- If you have flu-like symptoms such as a cough, sore throat, fever – stay home, consider seeing a physician, and seek medical attention if you believe you have had recent contact (within the past seven days) with someone who has had the swine flu or someone who has had a severe respiratory illness in the seven days before becoming ill.

“For generally healthy people, common sense personal hygiene measures – such as washing your hands and sneezing or coughing into your upper sleeve or elbow – also apply and can help reduce the spread of disease.”

News media only: For more information about Relay For Life events in your community and any impact swine flu may have on the date of the Relay, please log onto http://www.cancer.org/mediacontacts and use the state drop down menu to reach a media relations contact in your area.

General public: For more information about Relay For Life and events in your community, please log on to http://www.RelayForLife.org/relay/findevent and select your local event or call the American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345.

For more information about the swine flu, please refer to the information provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the CDC. Following are some useful links:

In addition, the following Web links may prove helpful:

For current status from the WHO on the Pandemic Alert Level, along with explanations:
http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/phase/en/index.html

FAQ from the World Health Organization on swine flu:
http://www.who.int/csr/swine_flu/swineflu_qanda_20090425.pdf

The WHO Epidemic and Pandemic Alert and Response (EPR) home page:
http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/index.html

Home page of the CDC for swine influenza: http://www.cdc.gov/swineflu/

Key facts about swine influenza from the CDC: http://www.cdc.gov/swineflu/key_facts.htm#humans

Links to current state pandemic plans:

http://pandemicflu.gov/plan/stateplans.html

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