

The News



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friday may 8, 2009 • MEXICO CITY

Year 59 Number 303 24 pages \$15.00

www.thenews.com.mx

Latest school supplies: hand sanitizer, masks

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The News

**Swine Flu
Outbreak**

Mexico City was looking less and less like the epicenter of a worldwide swine flu outbreak on Thursday as students began returning to class and cinemas, party halls, bars and gyms – the last of the public gathering spots to remain shut down by the epidemic – were allowed to reopen.

Gina Arguelles, a third-year student at a private high school in the Coyoacán borough, was glad to return to her studies after being “too long” away from the classroom.

“It was way too boring because everything was shut,” she said of her mandatory vacation, part of a larger shutdown of public activity meant to contain the spread of the virus.

Public health experts say the swine flu can incubate for up to a week before symptoms appear, meaning that infected people can easily attend school, a movie or a social event without detection. But Health Secretary José Ángel Córdova said Thursday that a decline in new flu cases and evidence that the public is willing to follow sanitary recommendations had convinced officials to restart public activity.

“The risk [of new infections] is less significant than the benefit obtained from a return to class,” he said at a press conference.



Students congregate at UNAM on Thursday, their first day back in class since all schools in the city were closed starting April 24.

Officials are requiring that reopened schools and businesses follow tightened hygiene rules, including screening people for illness, providing hand sanitizer and requiring that employees use surgical masks.

However, it has been unclear at times whether the measures are requirements or recommendations, and the instructions have often been vague or seemingly contradictory.

Córdova said Thursday that restaurants, bars and other social establishments should reduce capacity by 50 percent and keep patrons 1.7 meters

apart – unless they are people with a previous history of close contact, such as family members.

And while the Health Secretariat has issued guidelines telling cinemas to seat moviegoers 2 meters apart, ushers at the Cinemex chain in Mexico City told The News that they were enforcing no seating regulations.

A MIXED BAG

At the city’s high schools and universities on Thursday – primary and preschools won’t open until Monday – returning students were met at the gate

with health questionnaires, cursory checkups and gobs of hand sanitizer. Inside the classroom, a new fashion trend took hold as students and faculty sported surgical masks.

“All the face masks in class were a little out of the ordinary,” said Adrián Ruzirreta, a third-year student at De La Salle High School in the Condesa neighborhood.

“But it was still nice to see my friends.”

Cristián Renato Guzmán Molina, spokesman at De La Salle, said health screenings had turned up 32 students

with flu-like symptoms, and all were sent home immediately. Otherwise, he said, attendance had been excellent.

At the UNAM law school, administrators provided hand sanitizer and masks, but student Julio César Muñoz said that only about 10 percent of his classmates and none of his instructors bothered to wear the masks in class.

In an outside courtyard, students greeted their classmates with handshakes and pecks on the cheek, while others swapped drags from the same cigarette.

Elsewhere, calls for increased hygiene were met with a similarly mixed effort.

Reuters reported that visitors to the National Anthropology Museum were required to pass through three separate health checks. But at some of the city’s popular sidewalk eateries, vendors had already abandoned the requisite surgical mask.

“It’s so hot inside this stall that it makes the mask uncomfortable,” said Porfirio Rodríguez, a juice and sandwich vendor in the Colonia Narvarte who had pulled his mask down onto his neck.

CONFIRMATIONS CONTINUE

Córdova announced early Thursday that the nation’s confirmed death toll from swine flu had risen overnight from 42 to 44, but that the two new victims – a woman from San Luis Potosí and a man from Tlaxcala – had died weeks ago.

On Wednesday he announced 13 new confirmed deaths, with six coming May 1-6.

Córdova has previously pledged not to declare the epidemic over until the nation has recorded 15 consecutive days without a swine flu death.

He announced Thursday morning that the number of confirmed infections had risen to 1,204 from 1,070, but that the number of new cases continues to decrease.

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