1. Report: Officials to check cruise passengers returning from Mexico for swine flu symptoms

Several news outlets in Alabama are reporting federal agents in Mobile will greet a Carnival cruise ship returning from Mexico Thursday to examine arriving passengers for signs of swine flu.

Alabama Homeland Security Director Jim Walker tells Alabama's Press-Register the agents won't have the authority to detain passengers who show signs of the illness but will give them protective equipment such as masks and advise them on virus prevention tips.

Carnival's 1,542-passenger Holiday is on a five-night cruise out of Mobile that includes a stop in Progreso and Cozumel -- both on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. The ship is scheduled to sail another cruise to Mexico departing Thursday afternoon after the ship disembarks its current passengers.

The Press-Register says employees at the Alabama Cruise Terminal are taking a number of measures to prepare for the ship's arrival Thursday, including setting up additional hand sanitation stations and stocking masks and gloves that can be distributed on demand.

The U.S. government Monday recommended that Americans defer all nonessential travel to Mexico, but Carnival and other major lines say they plan to go ahead with voyages to the country from multiple ports in the USA including Mobile, Miami and Los Angeles.

Carnival alone has four ships carrying around 10,000 passengers arriving in Mexico today.
2. Cruise lines cancel port calls in Mexico as swine flu worries grow

(12:05 PM EDT) -- At least three major cruise lines have canceled port calls today in Mexico as worries about a potentially deadly outbreak of swine flu grow.

A spokeswoman for Princess Cruises tells USA TODAY both the 2,670-passenger Sapphire Princess and 1,970-passenger Coral Princess -- scheduled to call today in Puerto Vallarta and Cabo San Lucas, respectively -- have remained out to sea, and Holland America also has canceled a call today in Mazatlan planned for the 1,258-passenger Ryndam.

Carnival spokesman Tim Gallagher tells USA TODAY all three Carnival ships scheduled to call in Mexico today also have stayed out to sea. The 2,052-passenger Elation, which sails out of San Diego, had been scheduled to visit Ensenada. The 2,052-passenger Carnival Inspiration and 1,452-passenger Holiday, sailing out of Tampa and Mobile, Ala., respectively, were expected in Cozumel.

Carnival announced earlier today that it was reviewing its decision to go ahead with cruise ship calls in Mexico this week in the wake of the U.S. government warning that Americans should defer all non-essential travel to the country due to the outbreak of swine flu.

Carnival spokesman Tim Gallagher tells USA TODAY the line still is in the midst of forming a plan for the rest of the week and beyond. "We are actively working on plans for coming days and will advise as soon as possible," Gallagher says.

Among major North American lines, only Royal Caribbean went ahead with a planned call in Mexico today. The 3,114-passenger Mariner of the Seas -- one of the largest cruise ships in the world -- arrived in Cabo San Lucas this morning and is scheduled to remain until 6 PM Pacific Time.

The Princess, Holland America and Carnival ships together are carrying more than 10,000 passengers, mostly North Americans, and set sail over the weekend from U.S. ports.
3. Debate: Should cruise lines have canceled port calls in Mexico?

As recently as late Monday cruise lines were adamant the outbreak of swine flu in Mexico was no reason to cancel port calls in the country. But just 24 hours later they had turned on a dime.

In the wake of the U.S. government urging Americans to postpone all non-essential travel to Mexico, nearly every major line Tuesday including Carnival, Royal Caribbean, Celebrity, Holland America and Princess canceled all calls in the country for the coming weeks -- and in some cases indefinitely.

The changes will have a profound effect on some itineraries. Royal Caribbean's 3,114-passenger Mariner of the Seas, which operates seven-night cruises to Mexico out of Los Angeles, for instance, will now sail through the chilly waters of the Pacific to San Francisco, Seattle and Victoria, British Columbia -- a major switch for passengers who had been expecting a warm-weather getaway.

Other ships will spend extra days out at sea instead of days in Mexican ports such as Cozumel that offer everything from the chance to visit Mayan ruins to discount shopping.

4. Debate: Should cruise lines offer compensation for missed Mexico ports?

Major lines such as Carnival and Royal Caribbean scrambled Wednesday to find alternative ports for ships scheduled to visit Mexico in the coming days, and by all accounts they did a masterful job. In less than 24 hours, they reworked the itineraries of nearly three dozen vessels, securing last-minute berth slots in destinations as far-flung as Victoria, British Columbia.

Still, not everyone is happy about the changes. Passengers on the handful of ships that sail from the West Coast to Mexico, in particular, face the
prospect of a warm-weather vacation to Puerto Vallarta, Mazatlan and Cabo San Lucas suddenly turning into a chilly ride northward to the Pacific Northwest and Canada -- about the only other option available.

One vessel sailing out of Los Angeles, the Sapphire Princess, barely is making it out of its home port with new stops that include nearby Santa Barbara and San Diego.

Should passengers on the disrupted cruises be compensated for the switch and/or allowed to cancel or postpone without penalty?

While industry giant Carnival is generously waiving its cancellation policies and offering a full refund in the form of a future cruise credit (and, in some cases, cash), Princess is taking a harder stand, offering no compensation.

Royal Caribbean, meanwhile, is taking a middle road, encouraging passengers on its most affected ship, the West Coast-based Mariner of the Seas (which is heading to San Francisco, Seattle and Victoria, B.C., in lieu of Mexico), to call a dedicated help line to discuss compensation and rebooking options.

Cruise lines, of course, had little choice but to cancel calls to Mexico in the wake of the U.S. government's warning on non-essential travel to the country.

**UPDATE, 12:25 PM EDT:** Princess Cruises has reversed course on the issue of compensation for passengers on its re-routed Mexico cruises. The company just announced passengers on the current Sapphire Princess sailing and the ship's upcoming May 2 departure, as well as the current Star Princess sailing will get a 50% refund in the form of a credit for a future cruise (good to use for any sailing through April 2011).

Princess said in a statement that it realizes the three cruises were sold as voyages to Mexico and therefore passengers "are not receiving the cruise vacation they had anticipated."
5. Cruise lines slash rates to keep re-routed Mexico cruises on West Coast full

Anybody want to visit San Francisco, Seattle and Victoria, B.C., next week?

If you're a California resident, a week-long cruise to the three cities from Los Angeles can be yours for just $199 -- and we're not talking per day.

That's how low Carnival has had to slash fares today for Sunday's departure of the Carnival Splendor -- its newest, most state-of-the-art ship -- as the line struggles to keep the vessel full in the wake of the swine flu scare. That price, moreover, includes port charges of $159. Carnival's cut: $40.

The 3,006-passenger Carnival Splendor is just one of several California-based ships that normally sail weekly down to Mexico that have had to complete revamp their schedules over the past 48 hours due to the outbreak of swine flu -- a development that apparently has prompted some previously booked passengers to call off their voyages and reschedule for a later date.

"I have never seen close-in pricing like this," says Carrie Bajak, president of Cruise Holidays of Mission Viejo and a specialist in California cruises. "I can only guess that it is because of swine flu."

Even if you're not a California resident, the Carnival Splendor sailing is available for $399, says Bajak. And it's not the only ship on last-minute super sale. Also available for $399 is this Sunday's sailing of Royal Caribbean's 3,114-passenger Mariner of the Seas, another ship that has had to switch course drastically this week due to the swine flu scare.

Instead of three warm-weather Mexican ports, the Los Angeles-based Mariner also will spend next week sailing to San Francisco, Seattle and Victoria, BC.
6. CDC: Woman just back from cruise to Mexico has swine flu

A Colorado woman who recently returned from a cruise to Mexico has the H1N1 swine flu, according to health officials in the state.

In a press conference Thursday, the officials said the CDC had confirmed the unnamed woman's illness was the new strain, but noted she has not required hospitalization.

The *Denver Post* reports this morning the CDC has interviewed the woman, who has been isolated, and are pursuing others who might have been exposed.

Health officials did not say from which ship the woman, who is in her 30s, had just returned but did say she traveled to San Diego during the trip. Only one major ship, the Carnival Elation, sails out of the city regularly although a number of other vessels stop in the city on an occasional basis.

A spokeswoman for Carnival, Jennifer De La Cruz, says the line has not been contacted by the CDC about the case.

San Diego itself has begun reporting a number of swine flu cases (as of early Friday, eight confirmed and 13 suspected), which raises the possibility the Colorado woman contracted the illness while in San Diego after returning from her cruise.

On Tuesday, in the wake of a U.S. government warning to defer all non-essential travel to Mexico, cruise lines announced they were canceling all further calls in Mexico.

7. Report: suspected swine flu on Royal Caribbean cruise ship not spreading
Shares of Royal Caribbean stock dropped more than 7% Monday after the line said a crew member on a ship that recently visited Mexico had come down with what appears to be the H1N1 swine flu. But for now, at least, it looks like the illness has been contained.

The chief medical officer of Alaska -- where the 2,112-passenger ship, the Serenade of the Seas, now is sailing -- tells the local NBC affiliate in Anchorage, KTUU, there's no sign the crew member has passed on the disease to others on board.

"We're told by our colleagues at the (U.S. Centers for Disease Control) that there's not any increased cases of respiratory illness aboard the cruise ship right now, and I know that they're looking hard to identify any of those cases," the health official, Jay Butler, told the media outlet.

The female crew member became ill on May 2 -- the same day the ship departed San Francisco on a 14-day voyage to Alaska and Canada. The ship had just finished a 14-night repositioning cruise through the Panama Canal that included stops in Huatulco, Mexico on April 26 and Acapulco, Mexico on April 27. Royal Caribbean suspended calls in Mexico one day later.

Several news outlets have reported the crew member tested positive for the H1N1 flu in a test done at a Washington State Public Health Laboratory, but officials are awaiting verification from the CDC.

The crew member was isolated on board the ship two days after she became ill.

8. Debate: Have cruise lines gone too far in leaving Mexico through June?

At first it was just going to be for a few days. But the cruise industry's pullout from Mexico in the wake of the swine flu scare now looks like it will continue well into June.
The biggest operator in the region, Carnival, already has canceled calls in Mexico on all cruises leaving through June 15. And Royal Caribbean also has canceled Mexico calls on cruises departing as far out as June 14.

The changes are having a profound effect on some itineraries. Royal Caribbean’s 3,114-passenger Mariner of the Seas, which normally operates seven-night cruises to Mexico out of Los Angeles, for instance, is now sailing through the chilly waters of the Pacific to San Francisco, Seattle and Victoria, British Columbia -- a major switch for passengers who had been expecting a warm-weather getaway.

9. Long term effect of swine flu scare on Mexico cruises? 'Too early' to know, say agents

Cruise lines have canceled all calls in Mexico for the coming week and, in some cases, beyond. But, as of now, most stops in Mexico planned for mid-May through the summer are still on. Assuming that doesn't change, will vacationers still want to go?

That's one of the big questions this week in the industry as fears over the swine flu outbreak in Mexico grip the world. Now is the time that cruise lines normally would be selling out sailings to Mexico scheduled for May, June and July.

"At this point it’s too early to determine if there will be an impact on bookings (for cruises) to Baja California and the Mexican Riviera," says Mike Brill of CruiseOne in Palm Springs, Calif. What is clear, he says, is that "potential cruise clients are taking a wait-and-see attitude before booking a close-in cruise to any part of Mexico."

Indeed, another CruiseOne agent, Becky Piper of CruiseOne in Strongsville, Ohio, says she's seen a shift in her customers since the swineflu outbreak became big news over the weekend.

"Clients who are looking for a cruise are still going, they are just looking at other (non-Mexico) itineraries," she says.
Both Brill and Piper report no cancellations yet from passengers already booked on upcoming Mexico cruises. But they're both getting calls from customers that, as Brill notes, are "expressing concerns, and questioning possible alternatives."

A third CruiseOne agent, Ralph Santisteban of CruiseOne in Miami, adds there seems to be a general assumption among cruisers that the issue will be resolved within the next few weeks or months.

"Passengers that are booking their cruises five to six months in advance have shown little if any concern as to the Swine flu outbreak," he notes.

All three of the agents praised cruise lines for their quick response to the situation.

"They have chosen to allow passenger safety issues to dictate their itinerary choices," says Santisteban. "It reinforces to consumers and to the industry itself that passenger safety and well being takes top priority."