

Worried about flu and kids? Here's some advice

CHICAGO—The nation's first swine flu death, a toddler in Texas, is tragic but health experts say not unexpected, and they advise parents to just take ordinary precautions.

Every year dozens of US children die from seasonal flu; that's one reason annual flu shots are recommended for children 6 months and older. So far this season, 55 children have died from regular flu, federal health authorities report.

While children, especially those younger than 5, are known to be most vulnerable to severe and fatal complications from seasonal flu, most children who get even the most aggressive strains of flu don't die.

So far, flu experts say there's no reason to think the new strain will be much different.

"Nobody should be unduly worried; everybody should be aware of

what's going on and doing things they should be doing in flu season anyway," said Dr. Mark Dworkin, an infectious disease specialist at University of Illinois at Chicago.

That includes covering your cough, washing your hands often—and telling children to do the same.

Dr. Carlos Perez-Velez, an infectious disease specialist with National Jewish Health system in Denver, says a good trick to get kids to wash their hands long enough to kill germs is to tell them to recite the alphabet A to Z before they quit washing.

Parents should also avoid sending children with fevers or other signs of illness to school, and should skip work if they have those symptoms—usual precautions when they or their kids are sick.

Some wonder about keeping children home from preschool or day care—often called "germ factories"—even when their kids aren't

sick and no flu has been reported.


Dr. Kathryn Edwards, a Vanderbilt University flu specialist, said there's no reason to keep healthy children home or restrict their activities.

"We need to respond to the swine flu just the way that we respond to seasonal flu," Edwards said.

The death in Texas, of a 23-month-old boy visiting from Mexico City, "is very, very sad, but we do not have any evidence to say that the swine flu is more severe and will cause more deaths than other flu," she said.

While there's no vaccine to protect against the new swine flu strain, some are in development. Experts say parents should still be sure to get annual vaccines to protect children against seasonal flu.

According to the CDC, more than 20,000 children younger than age 5 are hospitalized every year because of seasonal flu. In the 2007-08 flu season, the CDC received reports that 86 children nationwide died from flu complications. (AP)



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