

How to Protect Your Children From Bird Flu

Children are particularly susceptible to infection, and therefore are most at risk from catching it if it's spreading through your area and from dying of it once they do catch it.

It's significant that the first known victim of the current A/H5N1 strain of bird flu, back in May 1997 in Hong Kong was a three year old boy.

Despite receiving great medical treatment from Queen Elizabeth Hospital, he died of multiple organ failure in 12 days, because they could not keep him breathing.

Children have immune systems that are relatively undeveloped, just as their hearts, brains and other parts of their bodies are not fully developed. Because they're children, not adults. In technical terms, they have "naive" immune systems.

Also, children tend to spread the infections in their bodies to each other simply through playing. Younger children especially have little sense of social distance and propriety. They hit, wrestle, hug, crawl over and drool on each other.

This is why it's so well-known that if one child in a day care center or classroom is ill, all the other children, their teacher and their parents and siblings will also catch the same "bug."

Many of the known victims of bird flu have been children. It's quite likely that this is not only due to their lack of immune protection.

Children who live in rural villages where chickens wander freely are more likely to play with these chickens than adults, who're too busy working. Also, the ground is littered with chicken droppings full of viruses, and children play on this ground.

It's striking and sad that one of the bird flu deaths in Turkey was of a little girl whose relatives described her as very loving -- even toward chickens, whom she liked to kiss.

I sometimes worry about my local park, which has a small pond with many ducks. I walk around and just ignore the ducks. But many small children love to approach and try to pet the ducks.

Therefore, my first advice is -- once bird flu reaches your country, don't let your children play with either domesticated chickens or turkeys, or wild birds of any kind.

Also, stay out of zoos, especially the petting zoos where children have direct contact with animals.

Once bird flu reaches your area, keep your pets in your house or yard. We know that bird flu can infect cats and we suspect it can infect dogs. If you think your pet has been infected, get rid of it before it can infect your child.

If your child becomes sick, Tamiflu has been approved for the use of children over 1. However, it may not be available, and nobody really knows how much Tamiflu is needed to stop a bird flu infection in adults, let alone in children. Plus, in Japan Tamiflu is associated with causing neurological disorders, including committing suicide, in 12 teenagers.

Do not give your children regular aspirin or other pain relievers, because this could cause Reyes Syndrome, a rare but little known fatal inflammation of the brain.

Clean your children well after they've been playing. You must especially make sure they wash their hands. It should even be more often than the traditional after using the bathroom and before meals.

That's because the most common way for both cold and flu viruses to spread is by getting on people's hands, and then people rub their eyes and mouths with their hands. Children do this even more than do adults.

Once bird flu reaches the contagious pandemic stage, keep your children away from day care centers, schools and even other children in the neighborhood. You just don't know who could have the virus.

I know they won't like that, but the fewer people they come into contact with, the more likely they are to avoid the disease. They can relearn their social skills after the pandemic's over.

So it's also a good idea to plan to keep your children busy at home during the pandemic. They can play outside in their own yard, but should not leave it unless they're with you.

Have them bring their school books so they keep up with their studies. Have plenty of games and toys on hand -- including many nonelectrical toys and games. You can't depend on having electricity available, so include board games as well as computer games. You should save extra batteries for your radio and flash lights.

When you store food, concentrate on protein, vegetables and fruit. The sugar snacks that children love will reduce the strength of their immune systems.

They can take the same vitamins and minerals as adults, but of course in reduced amounts.

Still, if you are caring for a child sick with bird flu with Vitamin C, it'll be difficult to give them too much. Vitamin C is used up in fighting the infection, and bird flu is a powerful enemy that will require a lot of Vitamin C. Give them as much as you can get them to swallow.

Ordinary flu shots protect kids only against the 3 strains of ordinary flu authorities believe will be most common during that particular flu season. This includes the inhaled Flu Mist. No vaccine is yet available against bird flu, and it will take 6 months before there is one against a contagious form of bird flu. And by that time, the virus will have mutated some more.

If children must go out where other people will meet, it's a good idea to buy them a child-sized Nanomask. Ordinary surgical masks or even the N95 masks will not be effective.

And of course, consult with your children's doctor, especially if your child has any chronic medical conditions.

About the Author

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