

Talking with Children about a Flu Pandemic

Recently, there has been a lot of concern about the Avian Influenza and the possibility that it could cause a human flu pandemic. If the concern in your community is worrying your child, there are ways that you can minimize your child's fears while teaching him other behaviors that can help him or her stay healthy.

Pandemic Defined

- A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. The disease spreads easily from person to person, causes serious illness, and can sweep across the country and around the world in very short time.

Flu Terms Defined

- Seasonal (or common) flu is a respiratory illness that can be transmitted person to person. Most people have some immunity, and a vaccine is available.
- Avian (or bird) flu is caused by influenza viruses that occur naturally among wild birds. The H5N1 variant is deadly to domestic fowl and can be transmitted from birds to humans. There is no human immunity and no vaccine is available.
- Pandemic flu is virulent human flu that causes a global outbreak of serious illness. Because there is little natural immunity, the disease can spread easily from person to person.

(Source: www.pandemicflu.gov)

Flu Pandemic Worries and Your Child's Mental Health

Children are happiest when they can continue in the routines that make them feel comfortable and safe. Therefore, keeping your child inside and restricting social interactions with peers when flu rumors begin to circulate may be stressful for your child. By staying informed and teaching sensible precautions, you can keep life as normal as possible and help your child feel more secure in the face of the threat of a pandemic.

What to Say

Find out what they know.

As the threat of a flu pandemic gains public attention, it is likely that children will hear something about it on television or from a friend. Ask your child to tell you what he or she knows about the topic. Having your child tell you about the flu pandemic, rather than you telling him or her about it, lets you know what misconceptions or misunderstandings he or she may have.

Explain the facts.

Because the Avian Flu has gained a lot of attention recently your child may have a lot of questions about it. Tailor the information you give your child to his or her developmental level, using words that you know he or she will understand. You may wish to explain that the bird flu is a sickness that birds can get and that people have become ill from infected birds. People have been talking about it a lot because scientists think that the germs that cause birds to become ill could change, and it could become a sickness that people could get from each other. Make sure you explain that scientists aren't sure that this will happen, but they are working to be ready if it does happen. Clearing up your child's confusion and providing the facts may make him or her less worried.



Talk about hygiene.

Having a discussion about flu provides an excellent opportunity to reinforce good hygiene practices, as they will not only help protect the child during a flu pandemic, but will also keep him or her healthier in general.

- Teach your children to wash hands frequently. The correct way to wash hands is to rub them vigorously together for 10 to 15 seconds using soap and water. Explain that their hands pick up invisible little germs that can make them sick. The germs get inside when they touch their eyes, nose, or mouth. Washing with soap and water gets rid of the germs before they can make them sick. Another option is to teach them how to use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Sanitizers with at least 70% isopropyl alcohol or 60% ethyl alcohol are effective.
- Teach your children to cover coughs and sneezes with tissues. Explain that the germs are caught in the tissue and can't get out where they can make other people sick. Make sure they know that they should properly dispose of the tissue and then wash their hands.
- Teach your children to be careful not to get too close to others if he or she feels sick.
- Teach your child to practice good general health habits, like eating a balanced diet, exercising, and getting enough rest.

Flu Vaccine

Scientists can not know how the Avian Influenza virus may mutate and become more dangerous to humans in the future, and must therefore wait until a change actually happens before they can begin to discover how best to fight the changed virus. Because of this, scientists can not currently create a vaccine to prevent a human pandemic resulting from the Avian Influenza.

If you take your child to get a yearly flu vaccine, he or she may wonder why everyone can't simply be vaccinated to keep from getting Avian Influenza. If your child asks, explain that the vaccine that he or she is familiar with is for a different germ- the germ that causes people to get the flu from each other every year. If the bird flu changes to become a new type of flu that people can easily get from one another, then scientists will start working on making a new vaccine for the new germ.

Make a Plan

If a pandemic flu does emerge, anticipate that you and your child's routines may be interrupted. You may even find that authorities advise you to stay in your home to prevent the spread of the illness. Think about what you will need in the event that this occurs and make a plan for your family so that you are prepared. Stock up on food, water, and medications. Experts recommend that you have at least three days worth of supplies in your home in case of emergency. Also have games, activities, and ways that they can communicate with friends (like over email) ready for your children to make the time spent confined at home less stressful.

Of course, should the level of infection risk rise, greater caution will be warranted.

Stay informed of recent developments.

- Check www.pandemicflu.gov or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov frequently for updates.
- Use national and local pandemic hotlines that will be established if there is a global influenza outbreak.
- Listen to radio and television, and read media stories about the pandemic and follow the instructions of your local health authorities.

