

Getting smart about the flu

Mich. schools teach students new habits

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H1N1 has a new foe: schools.

The environment where last year it might have waited for unsuspecting hosts -- from crowded buses to computer labs to college lecture halls -- is now the enemy's camp, and it's stocked with an arsenal of hand sanitizers, disinfecting wipes and relentless flyers about hand-washing and safer sneezing.

Parents are sending in wipes and tissues with their youngsters. Office staff have ordered extra paper towels, trash can liners, disinfectant cleaners and face masks. Custodians have been asked to empty trash cans more often.

And teachers? "If you just quickly wipe down a desk where hands and personal items have been -- or even where their faces lie if it's a boring class ... those aren't unreasonable measures," said Dr. Keith Kaye, a Wayne State University professor of medicine and the director of infection control at the Detroit Medical Center.

The weapon of choice for Andrea Evans has a coconut-lime-verbena scent.

The 3-ounce hand sanitizer slips easily into the 18-year-old's purse along with her cell phone, keys and calculator.

Using it is second nature, said the freshman at the University of Detroit Mercy. "We've kind of grown up with SARS, bird flu and now the swine flu."

Indeed, educators trying to teach good health habits -- and keep their classrooms full and offices staffed -- have found opportunity in last spring's panic over what was then more commonly (and misleadingly) called swine flu.

Though sufferers generally have mild flu-like symptoms and do not need medical treatment, it can also be deadly.

Schools are particularly worried because H1N1 -- unlike most flu viruses -- has been more dangerous for people younger than 25 than it has been for older people.

Educators tailor message to fight flu

Flu season has arrived early this year with a vengeance.

Each week in September saw thousands of reports of flu-like illness to the state -- we're at nearly 315,000 cases so far in 2009. Add in H1N1, and we're barreling toward 2008 and 2007 totals in the 400,000s, with three months to go.

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