

Schools Urged To Plan For Flu

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Connecticut's public schools should develop plans for banning sick students and teachers from school or even shutting down classes for months to cope with a possible global flu outbreak, according to guidelines issued this week.

In case of an outbreak, officials could screen students or staff before they enter school by checking for fever or other symptoms, says a report sent to public schools across the state by the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents.

"Depending on the severity of [the influenza] ... it may become necessary to actively find and exclude students and staff who may be infected," the report says.

The report, including guidelines written by a committee of school superintendents and health officials, was issued in preparation for a possible large-scale spread of flu, similar to a pandemic in 1918 and smaller outbreaks in 1957 and 1968.

Health officials have raised concerns about the dangers of a pandemic in light of the recent spread of influenza among bird populations in Asia and Europe. Although the relatively few human infections are believed to have been contracted directly from birds, officials fear the strain could develop the ability to spread from person to person.

If not the bird flu, another strain is likely to threaten humans eventually and lead to a worldwide epidemic, officials believe.

"It is not a matter of 'if' an influenza pandemic will hit the United States, but rather 'when,'" wrote David Larson, executive director of the superintendents' association, in a letter accompanying this week's report.

The report recommends that schools promote personal hygiene practices, such as washing hands, and stockpiling surgical masks, gloves, alcohol, soap and other supplies.

The report, said Larson, "was something that had to be done. ... Schools are breeding grounds [for flu]. You get all those kids in a room - they're coughing." Although some schools have started to develop plans, "my guess is the vast majority have not done too much," he said.

In the worst case, schools might be closed "for several weeks to several months," either because of high absenteeism or under orders of the governor, the report said.

"Part of the goal of doing any of these things - like closing schools or excluding sick people - is to buy time," said Dr. James Hadler, head of the infectious diseases section of the state Department of Public Health and a member of the committee that wrote the report.

"We know a totally unchecked pandemic ... would have the potential to totally overwhelm hospitals," he said.

The report calls on school officials to develop plans for handling matters such as building maintenance and payroll during a shutdown. If hospitals are filled to capacity, some schools might be used as triage centers, the report says.

Similar planning for a flu pandemic is taking place in schools across the United States, said a report last week in a newsletter from the National School Boards Association.

A U.S. Health and Human Services Pandemic Influenza Plan estimates that about 30 percent of the general population would become ill in a pandemic. Among school-aged children, the figure would be higher, about 40 percent, the agency estimates.