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Flu doesn't have to scare off trick-or-treaters

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By BY PETER BACQUÉ Media General News

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Fear of the swine flu is no reason to be scared off of Halloween.

Parents, children and neighbors can say "Boo!" to the flu this Saturday if they use some simple hygiene measures, public health experts said.

"People need to continue their activities and just be smart about it," said Virginia Commonwealth University's Dr. Robin Foster.

Because children are the prime victims of the H1N1 influenza and its main means of transmission, Foster offered some tips to help keep children safe from the potentially deadly strain of flu:

Drop candy directly into children's treat bags rather than handing it to them.

Both trick-or-treaters and the people they visit should use hand sanitizer after each encounter.

Don't eat the candy while trick-or-treating. Packages can carry the virus for hours.

Throw out any candy that has been removed from its original package.

Make sure the children have a good dinner before they go trick-or-treating. That will reduce the temptation to gobble candy as they go from house to house.

Avoid Halloween party games such as bobbing-for-apples that could spread the virus.

Don't go out scary-making with a sick child.

"People need to make sure their kids are well if they take them out treat-or-treating," cautioned Foster, associate professor of emergency medicine and director of pediatric emergency services at VCU Medical Center. "One of the big messages is if you're sick, stay at home," agreed Dr. Michael Edmond, chairman of the VCU School of Medicine's division of infectious diseases.

Children also should be taught to cover their sneezes and coughs and to wash their hands frequently, said Dr. Kay Rankin, director of the Crater Health District.

"These hygiene measures are important," she said.

At private preschool Rainbow Station's locations, teachers and nurses are focused on sanitation and doing daily health checks of their young charges, said the president and CEO, Gail Johnson, who is a pediatric nurse.

"We have stepped up our scrutiny of children with potential symptoms," Johnson said.

Rainbow Station locations have on-site infirmaries — the Get Well Place — to provide emergency backup care to working parents when their children are ill, and special rooms to isolate children with respiratory illnesses.

Though the H1N1 flu vaccine has been slow in coming, more than 22 million doses are available now nationwide, and most Americans should soon find it easier to get their dose, U.S. health officials said Tuesday.

Last week there were just 14 million doses on hand, and they would be ready by mid-October. The government later said the trickle has frustrated Americans, who have stood in line for weeks. Frieden has probably increased demand, Frieden said.

"It's quite likely that that too little vaccine is one of the things that has kept people from getting vaccinated, frankly. When we have shortages, we see a lot of people who are not vaccinated."

Over time, the government expects to have as many as 1 billion doses available.

CDC officials estimate that the swine-flu virus, first identified in Mexico, has caused at least mild illness in many millions of others.

Peter Bacqué is a staff writer at the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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