

Athletes warned: don't share personal items

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H1N1 Flu | Label water bottles, say experts

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TORONTO - Health experts and sports associations are urging athletes to avoid sharing water bottles or personal items such as towels to avoid the spread of swine flu, which killed an avid 13-year-old hockey player earlier this week.

Passing around water bottles, for example, a well-worn habit among many younger players, is a particular no-no given how H1N1 is spread, experts said Wednesday.

"The risk of H1N1 transmission with shared water bottles would be huge," said Dr. Brian Ward, an infectious disease expert at McGill University.

"Personal water bottles please."

Hockey Canada is urging all players and staff to have their own drinking bottles labelled with names. The organization is also urging players to avoid lip contact with sport-drink bottles.

Flu viruses spread mainly through droplets from coughing or sneezing of an infected person. Infection can also occur from touching an infected surface, then rubbing the eyes or touching the nose or mouth.

Other recommendations from Dr. Mark Aubry, chief medical officer for Hockey Canada, include washing hands frequently, having hand sanitizer readily available, and not sharing towels, clothing or other personal items.

Experts note these kind of precautions are useful for stemming the spread of any infectious disease.

Dr. Don Low, a microbiologist at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto said the flu virus is not particularly hardy, surviving only a few minutes on hands and up to an hour or two on clothes or hard wet surfaces.

"It's not going to survive too long outside the body," Low said.

"Probably the greatest risk (of transmission) could be something like sharing bottled water."

On Monday, avid hockey player Evan Frustaglio, 13, of Toronto died from the swine flu, although it's not clear how he contracted it.

Tony Foresi, president of Alliance Hockey, said the death has only reinforced the need to educate players, coaches and parents about the dangers of sharing personal items.

"We're trying to provide our membership with as much information as humanly possible about the influenza," said Foresi, whose organization represents 20 Ontario minor league teams with more than 31,000 members.

"We've been doing that since the start of the season . . . and obviously, we'll be a little bit more aggressive in doing it since this tragedy has occurred."

Epidemic statistics show younger Canadians are being hit disproportionately hard by the swine flu, although deaths are rare.

Earlier this year, hundreds of Mexican League soccer games were played without fans present, while soccer's governing body in North America cancelled an under-17 tournament in Mexico in an effort to stem the flu epidemic.

Some high schools in the southern United States also cancelled or postponed games.

To date, Canadian public health authorities have not recommended similar action.

Sport officials also urged players to stay home if ill and to let others know immediately.

"If we're diligent in a few areas, we can really minimize any of these types of situations," said Ian Taylor, development director with the Ontario Minor Hockey Association.

"It's something we've been talking about for some time but certainly now, we're kind of shouting it from the rooftops."

Foresi said if teams can't field enough players, simply reschedule the game.

"Playing games isn't that important when we're dealing with the health of everybody," he said.