

Risk to all ages: 100 kids die of flu each year

Published on Bioscience Technology (<http://www.biosciencetechnology.com>)

Risk to all ages: 100 kids die of flu each year

MIKE STOBBE - AP Medical Writer - Associated Press

How bad is this flu season, exactly? Look to the children.

Twenty flu-related deaths have been reported in kids so far this winter, one of the worst tolls this early in the year since the government started keeping track in 2004.

But while such a tally is tragic, that does not mean this year will turn out to be unusually bad. Roughly 100 children die in an average flu season, and it's not yet clear the nation will reach that total.

The deaths this year have included a 6-year-old girl in Maine, a 15-year Michigan student who loved robotics, and 6-foot-4 Texas high school senior Max Schwolert, who grew sick in Wisconsin while visiting his grandparents for the holidays.

"He was kind of a gentle giant" whose death has had a huge impact on his hometown of Flower Mound, said Phil Schwolert, the Texas boy's uncle.

Health officials only started tracking pediatric flu deaths nine years ago, after media reports called attention to children's deaths. That was in 2003-04 when the primary flu germ was the same dangerous flu bug as the one dominating this year. It also was an earlier than normal flu season.

The government ultimately received reports of 153 flu-related deaths in children, from 40 states, and most of them had occurred by the beginning of January. But the reporting was scattershot. So in October 2004, the government started requiring all states to report flu-related deaths in kids.

Other things changed, most notably a broad expansion of who should get flu shots. During the terrible 2003-04 season, flu shots were only advised for children ages 6 months to 2 years.

That didn't help 4-year-old Amanda Kanowitz, who one day in late February 2004 came home from preschool with a cough and died less than three days later. Amanda was found dead in her bed that terrible Monday morning, by her mother.

"The worst day of our lives," said her father, Richard Kanowitz, a Manhattan attorney who went on to found a vaccine-promoting group called Families Fighting Flu.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention gradually expanded its flu shot guidance, and by 2008 all kids 6 months and older were urged to get the vaccine. As a result, the vaccination rate for kids grew from under 10 percent back then to around 40 percent today.

Risk to all ages: 100 kids die of flu each year

Published on Bioscience Technology (<http://www.biosciencetechnology.com>)

Flu vaccine is also much more plentiful. Roughly 130 million doses have been distributed this season, compared to 83 million back then. Public education seems to be better, too, Kanowitz observed.

The last unusually bad flu season for children, was 2009-10 — the year of the new swine flu, which hit young people especially hard. As of early January 2010, 236 flu-related deaths of kids had been reported since the previous August.

It's been difficult to compare the current flu season to those of other winters because this one started about a month earlier than usual.

Look at it this way: The nation is currently about five weeks into flu season, as measured by the first time flu case reports cross above a certain threshold. Two years ago, the nation wasn't five weeks into its flu season until early February, and at that point there were 30 pediatric flu deaths — or 10 more than have been reported at about the same point this year. That suggests that when the dust settles, this season may not be as bad as the one only two years ago.

But for some families, it will be remembered as the worst ever.

In Maine, 6-year-old Avery Lane — a first-grader in Benton who had recently received student-of-the-week honors — died in December following a case of the flu, according to press reports. She was Maine's first pediatric flu death in about two years, a Maine health official said.

In Michigan, 15-year-old Joshua Polehna died two weeks ago after suffering flu-like symptoms. The Lake Fenton High School student was the state's fourth pediatric flu death this year, according to published reports.

And in Texas, the town of Flower Mound mourned Schwolert, a healthy, lanky 17-year-old who loved to golf and taught Sunday school at the church where his father was a youth pastor.

Late last month, he and his family drove 16 hours to spend the holidays with his grandparents in Amery, Wis., a small town near the Minnesota state line. Max felt fluish on Christmas Eve, seemed better the next morning but grew worse that night. The family decided to postpone the drive home and took him to a local hospital. He was transferred to a medical center in St. Paul, Minn., where he died on Dec. 29.

He'd been accepted to Oklahoma State University before the Christmas trip. And an acceptance letter from the University of Minnesota arrived in Texas while Max was sick in Minnesota, his uncle said.

Nearly 1,400 people attended a memorial service for Max two weeks ago in Texas.

"He exuded care and love for other people," Phil Schwolert said.

"The bottom line is take care of your kids, be close to your kids," he said.

Risk to all ages: 100 kids die of flu each year

Published on Bioscience Technology (<http://www.biosciencetechnology.com>)

On average, an estimated 24,000 Americans die each flu season, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. People who are elderly and with certain chronic health conditions are generally at greatest risk from flu and its complications.

The current vaccine is about 60 percent effective, and is considered the best protection available. Max Schwolert had not been vaccinated, nor had the majority of the other pediatric deaths.

Even if kids are vaccinated, parents should be watchful for unusually severe symptoms, said Lyn Finelli of the CDC.

"If they have influenza-like illness and are lethargic, or not eating, or look punky — or if a parent's intuition is the kid doesn't look right and they're alarmed — they need to call the doctor and take them to the doctor," she advised.

—
CDC advice on kids: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/children.htm>

Source URL (retrieved on 01/28/2015 - 1:18pm):

<http://www.biosciencetechnology.com/news/2013/01/risk-all-ages-100-kids-die-flu-each-year>