



Does Halloween Brew Germs or Just Fright of the Flu?

Real Ways to Spread H1N1, or Any Illness, May Not Be What You Think

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For [germaphobe](#) parents, the idea of Halloween can be as scary as the best goblins on the street.

Weeks before Halloween there are the bins and racks of masks at every major department store. Kids pounce to try on each one, even if the rubber is still warm and ripe from the last person. Then the squeamish have to contend with the open buckets of candy and the many hands that fingered each piece.

Yet despite the ways to torture the finicky among us on Halloween, doctors say trick-or-treat may be no worse than any other holiday for [spreading illness](#).

Where Does a Virus Like to Live?

"You're more likely to get the virus from contact from [shaking someone's hand](#) or hugging them than handing them a Snickers bar," said Dr. Michael Muszynski, a pediatric infectious disease specialist and dean of the Florida State University Regional Medical School in Orlando.

According to Muszynski, [a flu virus](#) prefers a cold, hard environment to survive if it's not in a person's warm wet nasal passages.

So, one reason why Halloween may pose less of a threat than, say, a schmoozing Christmas party, is the plastic around the candy and the rubber masks.

"The flu virus likes hard surfaces to live on and can probably survive no longer than two to eight hours on really hard and cold surfaces," said Muszynski, who added that a lingering virus is much more of a problem on door handles than on something porous like a tissue, or a rubber mask.

"It's unlikely that someone who's getting influenza all over a mask [in a store] is leaving it on long enough to infect people," Muszynski said. "I would be really shocked if a flu virus lasts longer than a few hours on a candy wrapper."

Unless you pop in to a party, Halloween's traditional trick-or-treat has another built-in safety feature: It's outdoors.

"Outdoor contact is always less intense than indoor contact," said Karen Kotloff, a pediatrician at the Hospital for Children in Baltimore. Kotloff said she hasn't even heard of a flu outbreak from Halloween.

But that [doesn't mean people can leave all hygiene concerns](#) by the racks of masks at discount department stores, or at your neighbor's doorstep. Kotloff herself advises the trick-or-treatee to hand out candy rather than let the children choose.

What to Do About Swine Flu on Halloween?

In addition, Muszynski thought the best prevention for the flu is always the vaccine.

"If you want to protect your child, then get your child immunized, there's no doubt about it," he said. "The most practical advice is to get vaccinated from this [N1H1] virus."

"Any time kids are sharing items that touch the body and touch the faces there's a risk of contamination," said Dr. Christopher Tolcher, spokesman for the American Academy of Pediatrics and clinical assistant professor at the University of Southern California.

"And, I don't think there's any reason that a costume would protect you," he said.

Tolcher cautioned parents not to think a costume mask and gloves could stop the spread of the flu. For a mask to work, it must be tight-fitting and made of a specific material to block the virus.

Gloves won't help either, "because children do the same things with their gloved hands as with their naked hands -- touching things and touching their mouths," Tolcher said.

To help, Tolcher recommended parents teach children not to touch their faces and keep sick kids home for a full 24 hours after any signs of a fever.

"Do not suppress the fever with medicine and then say, 'Oh, they're fine to go out,'" he added.

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