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Will masks stop bird flu? Students experiment

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FARE FINDER



By Maggie Fox, Health and Science Editor

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Can wearing a face mask and regularly cleaning hands stop the spread of deadly bird flu? Students at the University of Michigan started a living experiment on Tuesday to find out.

They are using the peak of influenza season to see if simple cotton masks and little bottles of hand sanitizer will protect them.

Health experts fear the H5N1 avian influenza virus might mutate any moment and start a pandemic -- a global epidemic that could kill millions. If not H5N1, some other new virus could do the same, world health officials agree.

They also agree there is no easy way to stop one. Viruses are very difficult to treat with drugs, unlike bacteria, which can usually be stopped with antibiotics.

Antivirals exist to treat flu, but are in limited supply. Vaccines take time to make, and there is very limited capacity to produce them. So low-tech measures will be the first line of defense against any rapidly spreading new disease.

While influenza is hardly new, doctors do not fully understand or agree on how it is spread.

The virus is carried in droplets that can be coughed or sneezed, and a great deal of evidence shows it can survive in little droplets on surfaces, to be picked up with an errant finger and transferred to nose or mouth.
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