



Children face poison peril in war on flu

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Hand sanitizer exposure among kids is often from hand to mouth.

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- It's become a common tool in a parent's arsenal against swine flu and the common cold -- a bottle of hand sanitizer.

But as an increasing number of parents citywide have learned, it's got an alcohol content higher than most hard liquors.

Hand sanitizers typically contain 62 percent ethyl alcohol -- the same type of alcohol in beverages, but processed and concentrated differently.

The city's poison-control centers have seen 25 hand sanitizer ingestion

cases over the past month -- more than double the 10 to 12 per month they typically see, according to officials with the city Health Department.

"Exposure is among children, and generally from hand to mouth," Health Department officials said in an e-mailed statement. The side effects of ingestion have not been life-threatening or serious.

Though health officials didn't speculate on the reason for the increase, hand sanitizer products such as Purell have been in high demand amid concerns over swine flu.

Last month, the makers of Purell announced that they haven't been able to keep up with the demand, despite increasing their staff and running their plants 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The ethyl alcohol serves as a quick, fast-drying antiseptic that businesses, hospitals and schools often keep handy to combat germs and stem the spread of illness.

Though officials at both Staten Island hospitals haven't seen any ingestion cases in their emergency rooms, a handful of stories about children getting drunk off hand sanitizer have made national headlines over the past two years.

In May 2007, a Tulsa television news station reported that Halle Butler, 4, of Okmulgee, Okla., was hospitalized with symptoms of intoxication after eating a small amount of hand sanitizer in her pre-kindergarten classroom.

And that same January, 2-year-old Sydney Moe of Minnesota ate a dollop of hand sanitizer because, as she later told reporters, it looked "yummy." She started to stumble and slur her words, and a trip to the emergency room revealed that her blood alcohol level was .10 percent -- legally drunk.

The city's public-school system provides a list of hand sanitizers that schools can provide, and it's up to individual schools to determine how it's distributed to children, said Margie Feinberg, a city Department of Education spokesman.

Schools typically dole out the amount given to children, Ms. Feinberg said -- "They don't give them the whole bottle. They just give them a squirt."

So far, she said, she's heard no reports from school nurse offices about ingestion or overuse.

Purell's manufacturer, GOJO Industries, warns parents to supervise children under 6 years of age if the sanitizer is used around them. In addition, the product comes in portion-controlled dispensers. The sanitizer also contains a "bitterant" designed to give it an unpleasant taste.

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