

Taking the kids — and staying healthy

Traveling now is a concern, but with a plan you can keep your family safe



Yomiuri Shimbun / MCT

Quarantine officers prepare to conduct an on-board inspection of a plane that arrived at Narita Airport from Mexico on Wednesday morning, April 29, 2009.

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Let's all take a deep breath.

Sure the swine flu news is making us nervous — very nervous — just when millions of us are planning our much-needed summer vacations. But that doesn't mean we should grab the kids and huddle under the covers.

We just have to plan — and travel — smart. So far outbreaks have been reported in New York, California, Kansas, Ohio, Texas, Canada and even New Zealand with the first U.S. death reported Wednesday. The World Health Organization, which has upgraded the influenza alert level, says that given the widespread presence of the virus, current focus should be on "mitigation

measures" and urges those who are ill to delay international travel and for those developing symptoms after an [international trip](#) to seek medical attention.

Of course, if we are smart, we're going to avoid "nonessential travel" to Mexico, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has now recommended. (For the latest information, visit www.cdc.gov/travel.)

No worries if you have already booked a trip to Mexico. The airlines are waiving change fees and cruise lines are temporarily diverting ships. You should be able to either reschedule or get a refund without penalty for your hotel too. (And if you can't, let me know!)

With every resort offering incredible deals this summer, you shouldn't have trouble finding an alternate destination for some fun in the sun with the kids. (Check www.takingthekids.com for daily deals.)

At the same time, it's unclear if everyone is heeding the advice of health experts. Tim Smith, spokesman for American Airlines, says so far the airline is continuing to operate its normal schedule of 42 daily flights to Mexico. "No agency has asked us to reduce our schedule, though we obviously will continue to monitor demand." Smith notes that, so far, the volume of calls from customers seeking to change their Mexico itineraries has been far less than during a severe weather event.

The most important thing, of course, is to do all you can to keep the gang healthy wherever you're going. "Watch the news, since swine flu is an international problem affecting numerous countries," urges Dr. David Tayloe, the president of the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), who has traveled widely with his own four children.

Strict hand washing — at least a minute — is key, Dr. Tayloe adds.

"Bring hand sanitizer," adds Atlanta pediatrician and parenting author Dr. Jennifer Shu, editor of the American Academy of Pediatrics' book on baby and child health. "Teach kids not to touch their faces and avoid sick people!"

"The goal is to avoid crowds and close contact," says Dr. Meg Fisher, the chairman of the department of pediatrics at the Children's Hospital at Monmouth Medical Center and an infectious disease expert for the Academy of Pediatrics.

Maybe that means you rethink your plan to hit a theme park, concert or a crowded beach. You might want to investigate whether this might be a good time to invest in travel insurance

(www.quotewright.com or www.insuremytrip.com) for your next trip. Just make sure you purchase the appropriate coverage in case you want to change your plans at the last minute.

If you are flying, use common sense — keep your distance from people who are coughing, **sneezing** or who appear ill. Check out the **Plane Clean Air Filter**, a compact gadget that attaches to the passenger's overhead nozzle that promises to remove viruses and bacteria from the air stream.

At present, the use of masks in airports and other crowded places is not recommended, says Dr. William Schaffner, chief of preventive medicine at Vanderbilt Medical Center and spokesman for the Infectious Diseases Society of America.

"A sick person could use the mask to reduce the risk of infecting others," he explains. "It is unclear whether the use of such surgical masks will help prevent a person from acquiring infection from others." Also, to provide any protection, masks must be used properly. They must cover both the mouth and nose. According to Dr. Fisher, however, young children will probably not take kindly to wearing masks. Adults either, she notes, as many find them uncomfortable.

Think carefully about where you are going with young children and those with chronic conditions like asthma, pediatricians say. Remember that toddlers and infants are much less able to tolerate illnesses while traveling, notes Dr. Shu. "This may be a special concern if medical facilities are not available nearby."

If you are away from home and one of you feels sick, stay in the hotel for the day. Make sure you have your pediatrician's phone number and email address with you. In fact, before you leave, ask your pediatrician for a referral for someone in the area where you'll be "just in case."

"Whenever possible, a family should avoid using emergency rooms for minor illness — the waits are often long and waiting rooms can expose your family to new agents and problems to say nothing of time lost from the fun things you want to do on vacation," notes Dr. Fisher. If you are overseas, the U.S. consulate or embassy can steer families to reliable sources of medical care Dr. Tayloe adds.

Tayloe also suggests talking to your pediatrician in advance about what prescription flu medications you might want to take with you on your trip and, especially if you're traveling out of the country, he recommends carrying acetaminophen, ibuprofen and prescription medication for traveler's diarrhea. It's also a good idea to have electrolyte solutions on hand to combat dehydration. If sports drinks or soft drinks are all you have, however, dilute them and drink small amounts at a time.

Of course, if any family member has severe **allergies**, asthma, diabetes or any other chronic condition, keep a supply of their medicines with you, not in the suitcase, not in the hotel room.

It's also smart — as I've learned the hard way — to always have a first aid kit on hand that includes bandages, gauze, adhesive tape, scissors, cotton swabs, antibiotic cream and **antihistamines**.

It really pays to be prepared, especially these days, wherever you're taking the kids.

Travel safe.