Reusing Face Masks In Pandemic May Not Be Safe

By ACSH Staff — May 1, 2006

A May 1, 2006 article [1] on ConsumerAffairs.com [2] quotes ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan reacting to the Institute of Medicine report that noted that facemasks would offer little protection in an avian flu outbreak:

“The message is clear: don’t count on a mask to protect you from influenza," said Elizabeth M. Whelan of the American Council on Science and Health. "More tried and true methods of protection -- including frequent hand washing and avoiding crowds -- offer far more promise."

The greater danger to avoid is "a false sense of security from masks," Whelan warned...

What's a consumer to do? Whelan said stockpiling masks offers little protection. "The virus is so incredibly tiny that it can defy even the most tightly-woven mask," she said.

"Second, flu is spread in three ways: first, by hand, as in the case of someone sneezing into his hand, then grabbing a doorknob, which you then touch -- or simply shaking your hand; second, by the spraying of droplets to someone in the direct path of a cough or sneeze; and third, by tiny particles that can stay suspended in the air for long periods of time," she added...

Whelan noted the N95 masks need to be fitted and replaced daily, not a practical solution for the general population.

"If indeed these masks offer any benefit, it is for preventing a sick person from spreading the virus through coughing and sneezing, as opposed to offering substantial protection to a person who is attempting to avoid infection," she said.

For more, see ACSH's report Avian Influenza, or "Bird Flu": What You Need to Know [3].