

Children can get COVID-19, but the illness often seems milder, doctors say

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Data on the novel coronavirus currently shows very few cases of serious illness or death in children and young adults, but experts say that doesn't mean they're immune or will not become infected.

Indications so far are that older people — those over 65 and especially over 85 — and people with other health conditions, such as those that affect the heart and lungs, are most likely to have severe or fatal illness due to the coronavirus. However, not as much is known about COVID-19 (the respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus) as earlier outbreaks of respiratory diseases known as SARS and MERS, and research is being done in real time.

To learn the basics about the coronavirus and kids, and what parents can do to reduce the chances of their children becoming ill, the Southern California News Group spoke with Dr. Michael Neely, who heads the infectious diseases division at Children's Hospital Los Angeles, and Dr. Antonio Arrieta, medical director of pediatric infectious disease at Children's Hospital Orange County. Here are several questions and the doctors' responses.

Q What do we know about children contracting the coronavirus? What does current research show, and what are the gaps in the data?

A "We do know that children can be infected; that's clear," Neely said. Based on current testing data, kids "do seem to be infected less often," he said, but because testing in the United States is only now becoming widespread, it's difficult to say that with certainty.

"This epidemic came on very quickly and the tests that we needed were not in place."

Arrieta said that while information on confirmed cases worldwide is changing daily, if not hourly, as of Friday the U.S. had no reported mortality in people 19 or younger.

The March 18 edition of a weekly report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that of 2,449 U.S. cases in all age groups from mid-February to mid-March, children 19 or younger accounted for no more than 2.5% of hospitalizations, and none were admitted to intensive care. Neither local children's hospital as of Friday had treated a confirmed case of COVID-19 in a youth.

Data from China also suggests that children "do not appear to be a

large source of the spread of the disease," Arrieta said, possibly because they're less likely to have the symptoms that most increase transmission, such as coughing and sneezing.

Q How does COVID-19 affect children, and what symptoms are they likely to experience?

A It appears children infected with the virus, if they have any symptoms, look much like adult cases, Neely said. Symptoms can include fever, cough and in more serious cases, trouble breathing; some patients have reported nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, but those seem to be less common.

But experts believe children who are infected typically have less serious symptoms and milder illness overall, he said.

According to data collected on 2,000 children in China with proven or likely cases of COVID-19, about 90 percent "had only mild or moderate disease that did not require any kind of health care intervention," Neely said.

Arrieta said he hopes it may calm people to know that with just 15% of Orange County's population in the 65-or-older, higher-risk category, "85% of the population is at very low risk of having serious illness."

Q How can parents and caregivers help reduce kids' chances of becoming infected with the coronavirus?

A The No. 1 recommendation, not surprisingly, is: "Good hand hygiene — it means washing your hands like crazy," Neely said. Get hands wet, lather with



soap for at least 20 seconds, then rinse and use a clean towel or air dry.

Don't gather in groups of 10 or more people, keep at least 6 feet from people while out and about and, if possible, stay home, he said.

Arrieta urged people not to rush out to try to buy or hoard hand sanitizer, surgical masks, gloves or other equipment that's needed most by medical professionals right now.

"There is no need to go desperately seeking protection," he said. "Soap and water for 20 seconds are as effective as any alcohol rub."

**Q** What can parents say to help a child who's confused or worried about the coronavirus?

**A** "You are going to be safe, that would be

the first thing I would tell them," Arrieta said. "You are going to be safe; we, your parents, are going to be safe because we're young people."

But parents should explain kids may not be able to visit their grandparents for a little while, he said, "because we don't want to give them an illness."



PHOTO BY KIN CHEUNG

Young passengers wear face masks as they arrive at Hong Kong's airport Monday. Children seem less susceptible to coronavirus, doctors say.