

## ITCHING • CONTINUED FROM 5

If scientists figure out how all these different mechanisms cause itching, they may eventually find ways to make itching stop.

As dermatologists learn more about what makes skin itch, some drug companies are developing solutions. For example, studies have found that newer products that dull the immune response at the skin might be useful in treating a chronic itch. Some studies have even suggested a role for antidepressants, quelling an

itch in the brain and not at the skin.

Although medical science has been able to address problems as complicated as leukemia or organ transplants, itching seems a basic complaint that should have been solved long ago. However, Bernhard says, simplicity on the surface often belies complexity below.

"Some things that are very basic end up being very, very hard to treat," he says.

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# Big Ten universities analyze bird flu outbreak possibilities

College leaders fear students travelling overseas could bring illness back to their schools if virus mutates into easily communicable strain; health experts fear human pandemic

Magan Twohey  
KRT CAMPUS

As a deadly strain of bird flu spreads through Asia and into Europe, and public health experts warn of a likely human pandemic, the University of Wisconsin-Madison and other Big Ten colleges are scrambling to prepare for scenarios like this:

A freshman comes down with a human strain of the avian flu after visiting Chicago, where the virus has surfaced. Three days later, she dies. Within a month, hundreds of students are sick. They flood the student health center, but the federal government says a vaccine won't be developed for months.

That tabletop exercise was conducted at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities last year. Since then, many Big Ten schools have begun planning how to manage,

track and care for students and staff who are infected. They're trying to answer questions such as who should get the vaccine when it becomes available and at what point to shut down campuses.

Planning is urgent, they say. Students and staff traveling overseas would be susceptible to catching infections from around the world. Dormitories, large classes and other campus activities would help the deadly flu spread.

"We worry that at our university, there is a potential to introduce influenza very easily," said Craig Roberts, an epidemiologist at UW-Madison who will participate in a meeting of university officials next week to address concerns about avian flu.

"We have students and faculty traveling to high-risk countries for influenza all the time. One of the scenarios is that they'll come back and

introduce it to this community."

Robert Winfield is director of health services at the University of Michigan, which launched a task force on the topic last spring. The group plans to practice setting up an emergency hospital on campus this December in preparation for a possible outbreak, he said.

"With the threat of pandemic influenza or even avian influenza, we thought it would be wise to plan how the campus would respond to a large outbreak," Winfield said. "We're recognizing that it could become something serious."

Meanwhile, the University of Minnesota has used the findings of its exercise to craft response plans, said Jill DeBoer, director of the university's Academic Health Center Emergency Preparedness Program.

The bird flu strain has infected about 120 people, and killed at least half of them. It has killed millions of poultry in Asia since 2003. At this point, the virus doesn't transmit easily from human to human. But public health experts say a human pandemic of some kind will likely hit soon because one has broken out every four decades or so — most recently in 1918, 1957 and 1968.

In recent years, UW-Madison and other colleges have crafted emergency response plans for a possible outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, known as SARS. They have implemented policies to screen students who showed up in their health center displaying symptoms. They have selected buildings where victims would be treated in isolation.

But colleges say preparations for SARS would be of little help in the event of a pandemic flu. A pandemic flu would likely be much more contagious than SARS. There would be no way to isolate it as it spread across the campus and into the broader community. It could take researchers months to develop a vaccine.

"Frankly, with influenza, I'm not sure quarantine will ever be effective," Roberts said.

Said the University of Minnesota's DeBoer, "What's clearly different with (pandemic) flu is that it will happen everywhere."

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Marquette University said they would follow the instructions of local government officials, who are preparing for an outbreak.

But UW-Madison and other Big Ten colleges are taking preparation a step further by examining these questions. Is it safer to send infected students home or to keep them on campus? Which university officials would be required to stay on campus? What role could online learning play?

"What do you do with 1,000 international students living in a residence hall?" said Winfield of the University of Michigan. "Do you keep them in a residence hall or send them home? If you keep them, how do you feed them?"

Because the human flu pandemic has yet to materialize, it's difficult for colleges to craft specific plans. Even so, university officials are viewing it as a top priority.

"It's imperative to identify the process by which these decisions should get made," Roberts said.

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