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Daily Briefing

IOM panel urges caution in use of facial masks during flu pandemic

04/28/2006

An **Institute of Medicine** (IOM) panel yesterday issued a report concluding that in the event of a flu pandemic, disposable face masks should be considered “the very last in a series of activities” to curb the spread of the virus, the *Washington Post* reports. The “anxiously awaited probe” was requested by **HHS** to help determine whether, in the event of a shortage, the masks could be disinfected and reused. The 12-member panel says thicker face masks known as N95 respirators offer some protection from the virus when worn effectively. However, the experts warn that there is “no safe way to decontaminate a disposable face mask so it can be reused” and that “even the best mask ‘will do little to protect a person who uses it incorrectly.’” They add that facial masks alone do not offer “adequate” protection from the virus and say they should be relied on only as “part of a package” of anti-flu strategies, including vaccination if it is available, quarantines, handwashing, and “social distancing.” Although the panel said N95 respirators cannot be safely washed and reused, it noted that wearers can extend the lives of the devices by covering them with a thinner surgical mask that can be disposed of at the end of the day. The respirator can then be stored in a clean bag and reused, but wearers must remember to verify that the mask fits properly with each use and to wash hands thoroughly before and after removing the mask. The **CDC** currently is working to build a stockpile of facial masks, but experts say hospitals and state officials also should build their own supplies (Brown, *Post*, 4/28; McNeil, *New York Times*, 4/28; Neergaard, *AP/Albany Times Union*, 4/27).

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