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Expert: Israel should get smallpox vaccine now

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In the event of terrorists' spreading smallpox in a large city as a biological warfare weapon, it would be preferable to carry out mass vaccinations than merely to vaccinate those who develop symptoms within four or five days and trace those who have been in contact with them before they infect others.

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So far, ministry officials have declined to comment on their plans or whether Israel has enough smallpox vaccine in stock to cope with any crisis.

Kaplan said Israelis are better able to cope with a biological warfare threat than Americans, because their logistics for mass vaccination are already well oiled from the Gulf War. Booster vaccinations against polio for all Israelis under the age of 40 also went very smoothly when an outbreak of polio occurred less than 15 years ago.

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"Terrible as it is, Israelis are managing quite well with terror. Since the US went on Yellow Alert with the September 11 terror attacks, Americans woke up to terror, but no one knows what this alert means and what to do," he said.

Kaplan, along with colleagues David Craft and Lawrence Wein, published his model in the newest issue of the Proceedings of the [US] National Academy of Sciences. After conducting a mathematical analysis of how many people were likely to infect others before coming down with symptoms and a variety of other factors, they said that if smallpox eradicated worldwide two decades ago as a natural disease were used by terrorists to cause worldwide panic and kill, tracing contacts and quarantining and vaccinating them would result in more deaths than would vaccinating everyone. This, despite the fact that one in a million vaccinated would die on average just from the vaccine due to having a weak immune system.

Symptoms, including high fever and a rash that can be mistaken for measles or chicken pox, appear within five days of infection, and vaccinating victims by then can greatly reduce their risk of dying from smallpox, he said.

He advised Israeli health officials to obtain smallpox vaccine for the whole population as soon as possible. While there is a worldwide shortage now, there should be 350 million doses ready for the US alone by the end of 2003. If smallpox were to be used by terrorists as a biological warfare weapon in a large city, or in an airport or train station that could spread the disease quickly either in the US or Israel he urged mass vaccination in the area instead of tracing contacts of those infected.

Before any attack, vaccinating some Americans or Israelis should also be considered to raise the level of immunity in the population. He said that while mass vaccination before any attack might be expected to deter terrorists from using smallpox and encouraging them to use another pathogen, Kaplan thinks terrorists might still be tempted to use smallpox to cause panic among the general population.

For the full story of Prof. Kaplan's research, see the Health & Science Page, Sunday, July 28.

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