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 LONDON (Reuters) - Travel restrictions and other measures help limit the spread of the new H1N1 virus but officials are largely ignoring the best way to stop the bug: focusing on children's hygiene, a researcher said on Thursday.

Citing a review of 51 studies examining different ways to contain respiratory virus epidemics, Tom Jefferson of the Cochrane Library said encouraging children to do simple things like wash their hands is most effective.

"I don't really understand why some governments are obsessed with popping pills and giving injections," Jefferson, who led the review, said in a telephone interview.

"The evidence is clear," he added. "Hand washing offers protection against a lot of things, not just respiratory viruses."

The review of published studies from around the world suggested that frequent hand washing, using gloves, gowns and masks with filtration, and isolating people believed to be sick help reduce transmission of viral respiratory diseases.

It also found that the greatest potential for preventing disease from spread came from focusing on children, not adults, Jefferson said.

"The main thing is if you teach children to wash their hands in schools, that is the biggest benefit to the whole of society," he said.

One large study, for example, looking at 4,332 children in poor Pakistani households found children who washed their hands with soap several times daily had 50 percent fewer episodes of illnesses such as pneumonia or cough than the others.

"One of the explanations we found is that children are the most sociable beings and have the most physical contacts between people," Jefferson said.

Since the emergence of the new H1N1 virus in Mexico health officials have scrambled to contain the infection that has so far spread to 33 countries, killed at least 65 people and put the world on the brink of a new pandemic.

And while quarantines, travel restrictions, school closures and facemasks have all been used, getting teachers and daycare workers to encourage good hygiene practices may do the most.

"If you enforce these kinds of hygienic measures in schools that is where the best benefits are," Jefferson said.

Another study showed school absenteeism dropped 43 percent when children used alcohol gels along with hand washing. Others showed younger children taught hand-washing at school or home were significantly less likely to develop a respiratory illness.

Source: http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2009/5/15/worldupdates/2009-05-14T230617Z_01_NOOTR_RTRMDNC_0_-396300-1&sec=Worldupdates