



THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS  
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF HEALTH AND HUMAN  
SERVICES  
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

November 13, 2009

TO: Massachusetts School Administrators, School Nurses, and Educators

FROM: John Auerbach, Commissioner of Public Health

RE: **H1N1 Influenza – Communicating With Parents**

The number of H1N1 illnesses continue to increase and as the H1N1 vaccine supply is, for now, only being distributed in limited quantities across the state, DPH would like to provide you with some basic talking points to refer to when speaking with concerned parents in your community.

**General Information**

- The flu virus is circulating widely throughout our communities, not just in schools, so we all need to use basic prevention steps everywhere.
  - Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze with a tissue or the bend of your elbow
  - Wash your hands often with soap and warm water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer
  - Get both a seasonal and H1N1 flu shot, when available
- This flu season we're dealing with two different strains of the flu; seasonal flu and H1N1 (swine) flu.
- We see seasonal flu every winter so over time we build up some resistance to it.
- However, a new strain of flu has emerged called H1N1 (swine) flu. Since we've never seen it before our bodies can't fight it off as well, which is why so many people may get sick. In general, it doesn't appear more severe than the seasonal flu, but because children in particular have not been exposed to it before, they are much more likely to become ill from it.
- We know parents are concerned about protecting their child from getting the flu and you may feel that knowing who is sick will help you do that. However, we can't know everyone who is sick because this illness is widespread in our communities. This illness is **not** like the measles or another very rare illness, where there might be a few cases in the community and knowing who is sick can help track exposure. Instead, in the case of the flu which is circulating widely in our communities, we have to focus on keeping our children healthy wherever they are in the community because they could be exposed to the flu anywhere.

### **What the School Is Doing**

- We are actively taking specific steps to stop the spread of the virus by screening all students for flu-like symptoms. This means we will be using the Flu Symptom Checklist that we have sent home to you, to make sure that students are well enough to be in school.
- If a child comes to school sick, they will be sent home. Please do not send your child to school if they are not feeling well. If your child has a fever, do not give them fever reducing medication and then send to school. This exposes other students to illness and leads to more students getting sick and higher absentee rates.
- Both students and staff that come to school with flu-like illness, or develop symptoms during the day, will be sent to a separate room until they can be sent home. They will be asked to wear a surgical mask if possible, and those caring for them will also wear masks in order to reduce the spread of infection.
- We are carefully monitoring absenteeism in both students and staff and may follow up with you if your child is absent to better understand his/her symptoms.
- School nurses and student health centers will report higher than normal absenteeism or clusters due to influenza-like-illness to the local health department and to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.
- It is important to note that we are not providing specific information about whether or not students have confirmed cases of H1N1. The vast majority of people with flu-like symptoms do not get tested, so relying on confirmed cases is not an accurate indication of flu activity in the school. Also, if there is flu present in the school, this means that there is also flu present in elsewhere in our community- in the grocery store, at church and on the playground. We all need to take the same precautions to protect ourselves everyday, regardless of where we are.

### **School Closing Information**

- When considering a possible school closing, we follow the recommendations and guidelines set by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH).
- The goal of both DPH and the Central Berkshire Regional School District is to keep our schools open and functioning as usual.
- DPH has recommended a policy focused on keeping all students and staff with symptoms of influenza out of school and related school activities during their period of illness and recuperation, when they are most infectious to others. For most people, this will be about 4 days.
- DPH recognizes that, on a case-by-case basis, some schools may need to consider closing. This option will take several factors into account including the extent to which the flu has impaired the school's ability to perform its educational functions. Thus, a higher than usual absentee rate does not necessarily mean that a school should close.

- We must discuss our situation with the local board of health and/or DPH prior to making any decisions. There are factors we need to take into account when considering closing our school. They are:
  - Absenteeism that is substantially higher than expected for the facility at this time of year
  - Confirmation that the absenteeism is due to influenza-like-illness
  - Indication that the already high absenteeism is rising rather than falling
  - Inability to function due to high absenteeism among students and/or staff
- Please keep in mind that flu will likely still be circulating when the school re-opens, so there will be the potential for more cases. We will have surveillance and control measures in place at that time. This will include actively screening students as they come to school each day to make sure they are well enough to be in school.

### **What Parents Should Do If Their Child Is Sick**

- Keep your child home if they are sick. It is very important that your child does not go to school or any other places where they could spread the flu virus to other people, such as after school programs, the mall, or sporting events.
  - Flu-like symptoms include: fever (over 100.4 degrees F), with cough and/or sore throat. Additional symptoms of H1N1 flu may include: runny nose, stuffy nose, headache, body aches, feeling very tired, and sometimes vomiting or diarrhea.
  - Most children will need to stay home about 4 days. They must stay home until they are fever-free for at least 24 hours after their last dose of fever reducing medicine, like Tylenol, Advil or Motrin.
- Be sure to call your doctor's office and let them know your child's symptoms and history. Your doctor will advise you whether you should come to the office. It is best to call ahead before bringing your child in so that the office is prepared to receive your child in a way that will help prevent spreading illness to others.
- Remember that DPH discourages the use of the hospital emergency rooms for treatment of flu symptoms unless directed by a health care provider.

### **What Parents Should Do If Their Child Is Healthy**

- Continue to send your child to school if they are not sick.
- Consistently reinforce prevention measures with them including frequent hand washing, as well as covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue or their inner elbow.
- If there is flu present in your school, this means that there is also flu in your community. Keeping your healthy child away from school will not help better protect them from the virus.