

*The Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
Executive Office of Health and Human Services  
Department of Public Health*

## **Information for Parents about Flu in Schools**

**August 31, 2009**

### **Will H1N1 (swine) flu come back this fall?**

Public health experts expect that H1N1 flu will come back this fall and will spread in communities at the same time as the seasonal flu.

### **It seemed like H1N1 influenza was pretty mild in the spring. Should I be any more worried about it this fall than regular seasonal flu?**

Many people who had H1N1 flu were not seriously ill. While most people who were sick got better without needing medical treatment, some people were hospitalized and some have died. Most of the people who became very sick were pregnant or had health problems like diabetes, asthma, heart disease, kidney disease, or suppressed immune systems.

### **Will the H1N1 flu virus be stronger than it was last spring and make people sicker?**

We don't know whether it will be stronger than in the spring, or stronger than seasonal influenza. We do know that more people will get sick with the H1N1 virus because it's a new virus, and most people have no immunity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other health organizations will continue to monitor the virus to see if it changes.

### **What can I do to keep my child from getting sick?**

It is important to teach your children how to reduce their risk of getting the flu and how to protect others from becoming infected. *If we all practice good hygiene, we can limit the spread of flu in our schools.*

- **Get your child both the H1N1 and seasonal flu shots.** Vaccination is the best way to keep your child from getting the flu.
- **Teach your children to wash their hands often.** Washing with soap and hot water for at least 20 seconds is ideal (about as long as it takes to sing the "Happy Birthday" song twice).
- **Teach your children to use hand sanitizer.** Gels, rubs, and hand wipes all work well, as long as they contain at least 60% alcohol. Watch small children using gels so they don't swallow it.
- **Teach your children to cough or sneeze into their elbow—not their hands!** Cover coughs and sneezes with tissues or by coughing into the inside of their elbow. They should wash their hands after blowing their nose or coughing into a tissue.
- **Teach your children to avoid touching their nose, mouth or eyes.** They should keep their hands away from their face.

### **Should my child get the seasonal flu shot?**

All children aged 6 months through 18 years should get a flu shot every year. This year it will be available earlier. You should get your children vaccinated as soon the flu shot becomes available, possibly starting in September. You can get it from your doctor or nurse, and from some pharmacies. Some communities will also provide flu shots at schools and local boards of health.

### **Should my child get the H1N1 flu shot?**

H1N1 flu shot should be available in October. The H1N1 flu shot is recommended for everyone, especially:

- pregnant women
- household contacts and caregivers of infants less than 6 months of age
- people aged 6 months to 24 years old
- people 25 to 64 years old who have certain health problems like heart disease, asthma, diabetes, weakened immune systems, and certain muscle or nerve conditions that can lead to breathing or swallowing problems.
- healthcare providers and emergency medical services staff

### **Can the seasonal flu shot and the H1N1 flu shot be given at the same time?**

Experts believe that seasonal flu shots and H1N1 flu shots can be given at the same time. However, we expect the seasonal flu shot to be available earlier than the H1N1 flu shot. Because the seasonal flu will still make people sick, people are encouraged to get their seasonal flu shot as soon as it is available.

### **If I got sick this spring with flu-like symptoms, am I protected from getting it again this fall?**

Unless you had a laboratory test that confirmed you had H1N1 influenza, it's possible that you had something other than H1N1. Even if you had H1N1 influenza, we don't know how much immunity it will provide for the fall. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) and CDC recommend H1N1 vaccine for everyone.

### **If there is H1N1 flu in my community, is it safe for my child to go to school?**

At this time, state and local public health officials recommend that students can--and should--continue to go to school, as long as they are not sick and do not have flu symptoms. Flu-like symptoms include: fever (over 100.4 degrees F), with cough and/or sore throat. Additional symptoms of H1N1 flu include: runny nose, stuffy nose, headache, body aches, feeling very tired, and sometimes vomiting or diarrhea.

### **What should I do if my child is sick?**

Flu spreads easily from person to person. If you think your child is getting the flu:

- Keep your child home. It is very important that your child does not go to school or other places where they could spread the flu virus to other people, such as group childcare, after school programs, the mall, or sporting events.
- 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 so that

you help prevent spreading illness to others.

- Call your child's school to notify them that they are sick, and tell the school nurse if your child has flu-like symptoms.
- Keep your school nurse updated on your child's medical condition.
- Do not give your child or teenager (18 years of age or younger) aspirin or aspirin-containing products due to the rare but serious illness called Reye syndrome.
- **All individuals with flu-like symptoms should stay home for at least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever, without using fever-reducing medicines.** These medicines include Motrin or Advil (ibuprofen), Tylenol (acetaminophen) or a store brand. Keeping children with a fever at home will keep them from getting other people sick. For most people, this will be about 4 days. See the 'Flu Symptom Checklist for Families and Schools' on page 4 for more information.
- Schools are **not** allowed to accept a doctor's note recommending a child with flu-like symptoms return to school before the time period described above.

### **Will my child's school be closed if there is a case of flu?**

School and public health officials will be focused on preventing the spread of the flu in schools so that schools can stay open. These officials will be closely following the situation and will inform you in the unlikely event that your child's school is closed. However, it is important to plan ahead. Talk to your family now to decide who would care for your child if their school is closed. If school is closed, it is important that students not gather together at another location, but rather stay home to avoid spreading the flu virus to other people.

### **What precautions are being taken at schools?**

- Careful hand washing is very important in preventing the spread of disease, including the flu. School nurses and teachers have been and will continue to remind and teach students about hand washing and covering coughs and sneezes.
- All school nurses, food services staff, principals and school faculty staff are working to prevent flu in a number of ways.
- School nurses will keep track of students sick with flu-like symptoms, so that potential outbreaks can be identified quickly.
- School nurses are working closely with local and state public health authorities as questions arise.

### **Where can I get more information?**

- Massachusetts Department of Public Health website at [www.mass.gov/dph/swineflu](http://www.mass.gov/dph/swineflu)
- Massachusetts Department of Public Health information line at 211

**Thank you for your help and cooperation in keeping our children and our schools healthy.**