



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

August 31, 2009

TO: Parents and Guardians of School-Age Youth in Massachusetts

FROM: John Auerbach, Commissioner, Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Mitchell Chester, Commissioner, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

RE: **Seasonal and H1N1 Flu – Back to School Update**

As a parent, you want to do everything possible to protect your children from the flu. This is especially important when a new flu virus like H1N1 flu is spreading. As you may know, flu can be easily spread from person to person. It's important to remember that *any* flu virus can cause serious illness. We expect to see both seasonal flu and H1N1 flu this fall. During the spring H1N1 flu outbreak, school-age youth were the most affected group. So as the new school year begins, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) and Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) are planning for how to keep students healthy and schools open. DPH and DESE pledge to give you the most up-to-date information about the situation, based on the most recent guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, who we work with very closely.

We want to work together with you to protect the health of students and provide the education they deserve. We will do this by preventing of the spread of the flu in schools and keeping schools open. Much of what we need to do has not changed since the spring of 2009. However there are some important changes.

- One of the main ways we can prevent the flu is by giving children flu shots against both types of flu.
 - Your child can get a **seasonal flu shot** as soon as possible, possibly starting in early September.
 - Your child should be able to get an **H1N1 flu shot** beginning in October.
- Children who have flu-like illness, will have to stay home from school for a shorter period of time than they did last spring. **Children should be kept home for least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever** without the use of fever reducing medicines like Motrin, Advil, Tylenol or a store brand. For most children, this will be about 4 days.

Included with this letter are two documents to help you with the flu this fall. They are the *Flu Symptom Checklist for Families and Schools* and *Information for Parents about Flu in Schools*. We will be sharing all of the same information with doctors and your local boards of health. It is important that we all understand what we need to do to protect our children from the flu and how to take care of them if they do get sick.

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



*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
- Massachusetts Department of Public Health information line at 211

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

Flu Symptom Checklist for Families and Schools

Updated August 31, 2009

The main symptoms of influenza (flu) include **fever and cough and/or sore throat**. Some people also have a runny nose, body aches, headache, chills and feel tired. Some people also have diarrhea and vomiting. The most important thing that you can do to keep flu from spreading in the community is to keep your sick child at home when they are sick.

SHOULD I KEEP MY CHILD HOME?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Has your child had a fever of 100.4 degrees or more in the past 24 hours?
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Does your child have a cough OR sore throat?
If you answered <u>YES</u> to <u>both questions</u> above, keep your child home.	
<u>Your child has an influenza-like illness.</u>	
CAN MY CHILD RETURN TO SCHOOL?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Has your child had a fever of 100.4 degrees or more in the past 24 hours?
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Has your child had acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Motrin or Advil) in the past 24 hours?
If you answered <u>NO</u> to <u>both questions</u> above, your child can return to school.	
If you answered <u>YES</u> to one of the questions above, your child CANNOT return to school. Keep you child home for at least another day to observe for additional symptoms. Then use the checklist questions again to decide whether you should continue to keep your child home.	

Where can I find more information about influenza?

- 1) Call the Massachusetts Department of Public Health information line: 211
- 2) Go to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health influenza website: mass.gov/flu
- 3) A "[Fever Fact Sheet](#)" with information on how to take a temperature is also available.

Fight the Flu.

Parents – Help Stop the Spread!



Get Vaccinated

Make sure your children get vaccinated. It's the best protection from the flu. Be sure to get both the seasonal and the H1N1 flu shots.



Cover Your Cough

Teach your children to cover their mouth with a tissue when they cough or sneeze. They can also cough or sneeze into their inner elbow, but not their hands.



Wash Your Hands

Teach your children to wash their hands often with soap and water. To make sure their hands get clean, have them sing the happy birthday song twice while washing. They can also use a hand sanitizer to clean their hands.



Stay Home When Sick

If your children are sick with the flu, keep them home from school for at least 24 hours after their fever goes away. This means they have no fever even when you don't give them medicine for fever.

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