

H1N1 Influenza

Frequently Asked Questions (K-12 School Staff)

September 01, 2009

What is H1N1 influenza?

The virus, called H1N1 influenza, is a new strain of Influenza A which can be transmitted from person to person.

How does H1N1 influenza spread?

Person-to-person spread of H1N1 influenza occurs in the same way as seasonal influenza and other respiratory infections. When the infected person coughs and sneezes, the viruses are released into the air where they can be breathed in by others. Viruses can also remain on hard surfaces like counters and doorknobs, where they can be picked up on hands and spread when someone touches his or her eyes, mouth and/or nose.

What are the symptoms of H1N1 influenza?

Symptoms of H1N1 influenza are similar to the symptoms of regular human seasonal influenza infection. They include fever, fatigue, lack of appetite, coughing and sore throat. Some people with H1N1 influenza have also reported vomiting and diarrhea. The vast majority of Canadians with confirmed H1N1 influenza have recovered without the need for hospitalization.

When should a student or staff member stay at home?

Any individual with flu-like symptoms – fever above 37.8 °C or 100 °F accompanied by cough or sore throat – should stay home.

What do we do if we have students attending school with influenza like symptoms?

A student who is demonstrating symptoms, excessive coughing and/or sneezing, or high temperature, should be moved to a location away from others until arrangements can be made for transportation to home.

Does a child need a note from the doctor before he/she returns to school?

No. From a public health perspective, a note from the physician is not required for return to school following flu illness. Physicians and health care centres are working to capacity during this time and need to be available to see and care for ill patients.

When should an infected child return to school?

Students who become ill with influenza-like symptoms should stay at home until they are symptom free, feeling well, and able to fully participate in all normal day to day school activities.

Should special attention be made to cleaning the school?

Schools should ensure that washrooms are cleaned on an ongoing basis. Soap and paper towel dispensers should be checked and filled at least three times per day or as required. Schools should pay particular attention to the regular cleaning of frequently touched surfaces, such as desks, doorknobs, telephones and pencil sharpeners. School staffs and parents should continue to promote careful hand-washing and covering one's mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing.

Does the use of hand sanitizer replace hand washing?

No. Hand sanitizers are not a replacement for proper hand washing. Hand sanitizers may be used as a supplement to hand washing in areas where several students are touching objects and soap and water are not readily available, (e.g., gyms, and computer labs).

Should a school close if a case of H1N1 influenza is confirmed in the school?

The Public Health Agency of Canada is not recommending the closure of schools. It is the Public Health Agency of Canada's recommendation that schools continue to practice basic infection control, such as frequent hand washing, covering coughs and sneezes, and asking those who are ill to stay home.

Will parents be notified if there is a confirmed case or cases of H1N1 in a school?

No. Health officials advise that the H1N1 influenza virus is community-based and circulates in the same manner as seasonal influenza. It is not localized to individual schools and therefore notifying parents will not assist in containing or preventing the spread of the virus. Basic infection control must be practiced in all schools regardless of the identification of a confirmed case of the virus. Notification could create a false sense of security in schools where a case has not been confirmed. The situation will be continuously monitored and if there are changes appropriate action will be taken.

Should field trips or sports events be cancelled at this time?

From a public health perspective, there is no reason for scheduled field trips or sports events to be cancelled.

What can the school do to prevent the spread of the flu?

Staff should encourage and promote basic infection control practices. Hand washing is the best defense against H1N1. Hand washing is the most effective way to control the spread of any germs including the H1N1 influenza virus.

Staff should ensure children are washing their hands often and thoroughly. This can be achieved by role modeling appropriate hand washing and assisting children to clean their hands properly.

In addition:

- Make sure washrooms are properly supplied with soap and paper towels and ensure maintenance of electric hand dryers;
- Post the Clean, Cover, and Contain posters in appropriate places throughout the school;
- Provide regular updates on flu prevention information to students, staff and parents via school newsletters, parent letters, staff meetings, assemblies and other venues;
- Use the services of the Public Health Nurse, online videos, posters and brochures to assist in passing along information to students and parents; and
- Encourage and supervise the use of hand sanitizers in areas of the school where there is frequent touching of objects and soap and water is not readily available.

What does Public Health Agency Canada recommend as proper hand washing technique?

- Wet with warm water.
- Apply soap and scrub for 15 – 20 seconds – all surfaces including the front and back of hands, between fingers, around nails (especially cuticles), thumbs and wrists. (Younger children can be encouraged to sing Happy Birthday or another short nursery rhyme to ensure they are washing their hands for the appropriate length of time).
- Rinse well.
- Dry hands thoroughly.

What does Public Health Agency Canada recommend as proper use of hand sanitizer?

- Apply enough product to your open palm so that it takes 15 – 20 sec. of rubbing to dry.
- Rub into hands covering all surfaces including the front and back of hands, between fingers, around nails (especially cuticles), thumbs and wrists.

Can parents give their children hand sanitizer for personal use?

Yes. Parents need to be advised that in order to be effective, hand sanitizers must contain at least 60% alcohol and, if your school is scent-free, the hand sanitizers parents provide to their children must be scent-free. Parents should educate the child on the proper use of a hand sanitizer.

What does Public Health Agency Canada recommend regarding masks?

The Public Health Agency of Canada does not recommend that members of the general public wear masks to protect against contracting H1N1 influenza. Evidence shows that this is not effective in preventing the transmission of influenza in the general public.

When is flu season?

Flu season in Newfoundland and Labrador typically begins in late fall.

Is there a vaccine to protect against H1N1 influenza?

The H1N1 influenza vaccine will be available in the fall. More information will be communicated on this as it becomes available.

Where do we direct parents who are phoning the school for more information?

- The Newfoundland and Labrador HealthLine: <http://yourhealthline.ca> or 1-888-709-2929.
- Department of Health and Community Services, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador: www.gov.nl.ca/health
- The Public Health Agency of Canada: www.publichealth.gc.ca