

Date: 21 August 2009

Dear Principal

### Swine Flu and Schools - Update

Since the world wide outbreak of Swine Flu earlier this year, the Public Health Agency and the Department of Education, together with its education partners, have worked closely together to provide the wider education sector with advice and guidance.

As you approach the new school year, we are writing to update you about swine flu. As you will be aware the number of human cases of pandemic swine flu (H1N1) continues to increase in many countries, including here.

It is now clear that there is community transition of the virus. As a result the emphasis has moved from 'containment' of spread of the infection to one of 'treatment'. It is important to restate that the influenza virus (H1N1) remains a relatively mild illness for the majority of the population, including school children. Although the risk factors for more serious illness are not known definitively, there is some evidence that those with existing illness such as cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease including asthma, diabetes and cancer are currently considered as additional risk factors for more serious swine flu.

If children become unwell it is important that they stay at home. If the illness is mild and there are no underlying risk factors then it can often be managed like normal flu by staying in bed and taking over the counter preparations. However, those with underlying conditions and with more serious disease should stay at home and telephone their GP or GP out of hours service. If a child becomes unwell at school then arrangements should be made to send them home as soon as possible. As in all circumstances the school is asked to ensure that there is someone available at home to look after the child. Therefore it is

important that your emergency contact details for parents, guardians and carers are kept up to date.

Now that we have moved to the “treatment” phase, in most circumstances, it is not recommended that the school should envisage closing. This is because the virus is becoming increasingly widespread within the community. People are likely to be repeatedly exposed to the virus in their everyday lives so that closing the school will no longer be effective in slowing the spread of the virus. In some special circumstances, for example a school with children who are particularly vulnerable to infection or because of insufficient staff numbers, a decision may be made to close the school. However it is important to point out that swine flu has to date, been a relatively mild illness, and as far as possible schools should plan to manage for ‘business as usual’.

It is essential also to emphasise the importance of good hygiene. This includes regular washing of hands with soap and water to help reduce the spread of the virus, regular cleaning of hard surfaces, using tissues when coughing or sneezing, disposing of tissues appropriately and ensuring as far as possible that good hygiene is adhered to throughout the school. We know that this is ‘common sense’ but it is an important principle to reiterate for all of us working on this issue.

We will keep you updated on further developments. In the meantime further useful information can be found on the following:

Public Health Agency – [www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)

Health Protection Agency – [www.hpa.org.uk](http://www.hpa.org.uk)

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety – [www.dhsspsni.gov.uk](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk)

The Department of Education - [www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk)

The official government website for citizens – [www.nidirect.gov.uk](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk)

and the Swine Flu Helpline is 0800 0514 142

Along with this letter we have provided you with an information sheet giving further advice in the form of Questions and Answers which we hope will provide you with general information about swine flu, as well as addressing questions that may arise in your school.

Yours sincerely



Dr Richard Smithson  
Consultant in Communicable Disease Control  
Public Health Agency

Will Haire  
Permanent Secretary  
Department of Education