



Information for special school principals on swine influenza A (H1N1)

This information sheet gives general information about swine influenza A (H1N1) (swine flu) as well as addressing questions that may arise in special schools. This updated information sheet recognises the change in policy from containment to a treatment-led approach given the community spread of the virus. It particularly addresses what should be done if a child develops flu-like symptoms while at school.

General information

What is swine flu?

Swine flu is a respiratory illness caused by a new strain of the influenza virus. This new strain has been named pandemic (H1N1) 2009 by the World Health Organization.

What are the symptoms of swine flu?

The symptoms of swine flu are similar to the symptoms of normal, human seasonal flu and include fever or history of fever equal to or greater than 38°C **and** two or more of the following:

- cough
- sore throat
- runny nose
- aches and pains
- headaches
- vomiting/diarrhoea

How is swine flu treated?

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 health conditions or whose conditions have not improved should stay at home and telephone their GP or out of hours service.

It is important that they do not go to their GP's surgery or to an accident and emergency department, but that they stay at home where, if necessary, they will be visited by a doctor.



Questions that may arise in schools

Does swine flu particularly affect children and young people?

Swine flu is particularly affecting children and young adults. Children are proving to be highly efficient carriers of the swine flu virus and schools provide the perfect environment for it to spread. There is also some evidence that there is less natural resilience to the virus in children and young people.

Will there be a vaccine for swine flu?

The development of a vaccine for swine flu is well under way. However it is not possible to say exactly when the vaccine will be made available because of the extensive tests that need to be undertaken to ensure its safety and effectiveness. It is anticipated that the vaccine will be available in October. The first groups to be vaccinated will be those of all ages, including children, **with underlying risk factors**. This is likely to include a greater proportion of children in special schools. Those children requiring the vaccine will be identified and offered the vaccine by their GP. At present there are no specific plans to vaccinate all children, however this is still being considered and we will keep you informed of any developments.

What action should be taken if a child develops flu-like symptoms while at school?

If a child develops flu-like symptoms at school, arrangements should be made for them to be taken home as soon as possible. While waiting, they should be placed in a suitable area, such as a medical room or small office (in order to reduce the chance of spreading infection to other children), but where they can be kept under observation.

Their parents should be advised to take the child straight home and if necessary to telephone their GP or out of hours service. Some children in special schools may live a considerable distance away and it may be some time before parents can take them home, or they may require access to adapted transport. In such circumstances staff should make arrangements for the child to be looked after in school until they can return home.

**Should the school close if there are children and young people with swine flu?**

School closures are not recommended at this time because the virus is becoming increasingly widespread in the community. People are likely to be repeatedly exposed to the virus in their every day lives – closing the school will no longer be effective in slowing the spread of the virus as people could still be exposed outside the school.

In some special circumstances a decision may be made to close the school. For example a school with children who are particularly vulnerable to infection or because there are insufficient staff members. A wide range of factors, including the vaccination status of pupils, will be considered before taking such a decision. However, it is important to point out that swine flu has, to date, been a relatively mild illness. As far as possible special schools should plan to manage 'business as usual'.

Should children who have had contact with a known case of swine flu be kept away from school?

No. As long as they are well and not suffering from flu-like symptoms, there is no reason for these children to be kept away from school and they can carry on with their normal routine. Parents should, however, be vigilant for flu symptoms and, at the first signs of these, should keep the child at home and, if necessary, telephone their GP or out of hours service.

Should a member of staff attend school if they have a close contact that has been diagnosed with swine flu?

As long as they are well and are not suffering from flu-like symptoms, they can continue with their normal duties.

What about children who have underlying health problems?

There are a number of children who may be at increased risk as a result of their underlying health conditions. Those children will be among the first priority groups to receive the vaccine when it becomes available. Children who are vulnerable to infection (eg those with respiratory illness, renal problems or compromised immune systems) and who develop flu-like symptoms will receive appropriate treatment. They should remain at home where they may require ongoing clinical assessment. Detailed medical advice for individual children can also be discussed with community paediatricians. School attendance of children with coordinated care packages should be discussed on an individual basis with the GP and care manager in the local Health and Social Care Trust. If children need hospitalisation, the hospital should be informed that the child has suspected flu so that they can be appropriately isolated and treated.



What about the families of children with special needs?

In certain situations it may be appropriate to offer vaccination to families of children with special needs. In other circumstances it may also be necessary to offer medication such as Tamiflu where a child is at higher risk of complications related to influenza. In these circumstances the need will be assessed by the GP in conjunction with the Public Health Agency.

What can special schools and parents do to slow the spread of infection?

By practising good hygiene, everyone can play their part and help to reduce the spread of all viruses, including swine flu:

- Cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue when possible;
- Dispose of dirty tissues promptly and carefully;
- Wash hands frequently with soap and water to reduce the spread of virus from your hands to face or to other people;
- Clean hard surfaces (eg door handles) frequently using your usual cleaning product;
- Make sure children follow this advice.

There is a simple way to remember this advice: **catch it, bin it, kill it.**

Some vulnerable children attending special school may be unable to wash their own hands. This should not be a cause for any undue concern and personal care should be attended to in the normal fashion.

Should hand sanitisers be provided in schools?

What is most important is that all schools have proper hand washing and drying facilities in their toilets at all times, including hot and cold water, liquid soap and paper towels or hot air dryers. It is not necessary to provide hand sanitisers, however should a school choose to do so, it is important to note that they are not a substitute for good hand washing facilities.

Is it safe for pregnant teachers to continue to teach if a pupil or another member of staff has been diagnosed with swine flu, or has come into close contact with a case?

There is no overall excess risk to pregnant women from teaching than they face in the community. In schools the emphasis should be on ensuring that symptomatic children are identified, isolated and sent home. It is however sensible for pregnant women to avoid close contact with those who have symptoms of the flu. Pregnant women should be aware of the signs and symptoms of swine flu so that they can telephone for early medical advice and, if indicated, treatment.

**Where is further information available?**

The Public Health Agency Emergency Operations Centre operates between 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday and can be contacted on 028 9055 3994 or 028 9055 3997 or at pha.eoc@hscni.net. Outside of these hours public health service advice (including advice on swine flu) may be accessed by phoning Northern Ireland Ambulance Control on 9040 4045 and asking them to page the first on-call public health doctor.

Please note that both these services are for health and social care professional staff only and these numbers should not be given to members of the public.

For members of the public, the Northern Ireland swine flu helpline operates between 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday on 0800 0514 142.

Recorded information is available from the National swine flu helpline on 0800 1513 513. More general information can be obtained from various websites, including:

Public Health Agency
www.publichealth.hscni.net

Health Protection Agency
www.hpa.org.uk

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
www.dhsspsni.gov.uk

Department of Education
www.deni.gov.uk

World Health Organization
www.who.int

Teachernet
www.teachernet.gov.uk

The official government website for Northern Ireland citizens
www.nidirect.gov.uk

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