

## **FAQs from the Polk County Health Dept. regarding Influenza during the 2009-10 School Year**

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### **Q. Are local health authorities still recommending that school closure be used to stop the spread of H1N1?**

Last spring it was recommended that schools close to stop the spread of H1N1 cases in the school. This experience showed that the potential positives of school closure were often outweighed by the negatives, such as kids being left home alone, parents missing work, and kids not having access to meals. When H1N1 returns this fall our goal is to minimize the disruption of the school and work day by focusing on strategies that are proven to reduce the spread of disease, such as staying home when sick, proper hygiene, good hand washing and proper sanitation.

### **Q. Why should we be concerned about the spread of flu in schools?**

Students who get sick with the flu can easily pass it to each other during school and bring it home to their families. So far, with 2009 H1N1 flu, the largest number of cases has been in people between the ages of 5 and 24-years-old.

### **Q: What is pandemic influenza?**

Pandemic influenza is a strain of influenza that has the ability to spread across the world. Pandemic means that a disease has caused someone to become ill on nearly every continent. Four things must happen before a disease can cause a pandemic:

- 1) It is caused by a germ that no one has had before
- 2) The disease must be able to infect humans
- 3) It must cause illness or death
- 4) It must spread easily from person to person

### **Q: How are the seasonal flu and pandemic H1N1 flu different?**

Influenza happens every year in nearly every country in the world. It spreads through a population for a few months and then will disappear or will move to another country. Influenza usually occurs in the fall and winter months. Also, people who usually become ill with influenza are the elderly, the very young and people with chronic medical conditions.

Pandemic influenza could strike at any time of the year. The strain will be one never seen before and it will spread quicker and easier from person to person. Pandemic influenza may cause illness in any person and in the past has caused illness in more healthy young and middle-aged people. It will probably circulate several times around the world or in “waves”.

### **Q. Which students and staff are at higher risk for complications from flu?**

Anyone can get the flu (even healthy people), and serious problems from the flu can happen at any age. However, children under the age of 5 years, pregnant women, people of any age with chronic medical conditions (such as pulmonary disease, including asthma, diabetes, neuromuscular disorders or heart disease), and people age 65 years and older are more likely to get complications from the flu.

**Q. What can school personnel, families and students do to keep from getting sick and spreading flu?**

School personnel, families and students can keep from getting sick with flu in **three ways**:

- **Practicing good hand hygiene.** Students and staff should wash their hands often with soap and water, for at least 20 seconds—the time it takes to sing Happy Birthday twice—especially after coughing or sneezing. Alcohol-based hand cleaners containing at least 60% alcohol are also effective. (Note: if alcohol-based products are not allowed in the school, other hand sanitizers that do not contain alcohol may be useful for cleaning hands, though they are not as effective as alcohol-based sanitizers.)
- **Practicing respiratory etiquette.** The main way that the flu spreads is from person to person in the droplets produced by coughs and sneezes. It's important to cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your elbow or shoulder, not into your hands.
- **Staying home if you are sick.** Keeping sick students at home means that they keep their viruses to themselves rather than sharing them with others.

**Q. What should I do if I'm pregnant and I work or attend a K-12 school?**

Pregnant women working in or attending schools should follow the same guidance as the general public about staying home when sick, hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, and routine cleaning. Pregnant women are at higher risk of complications from flu. If they develop a flu-like illness, they should speak with their doctor as soon as possible to find out whether they should take antiviral flu medication. Any person at high risk for flu complications should do the same. Early treatment with antiviral flu medication is recommended for pregnant women who have the flu. Pregnant women and their doctors should know that they are part of the first priority group to receive the 2009 H1N1 flu vaccine.

**Q. What are fever-reducing medications and when would I stop giving them to my child?**

Fever-reducing medications are medicines that contain acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) or ibuprofen (such as Motrin). These medicines can be given to people who are sick with flu to help bring their fever down and relieve their pain. Aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid) should not be given to children or teenagers who have flu; this can cause a rare but serious illness called Reye's syndrome.

A sick student can return to school after 24 hours have passed if he or she has a normal temperature (98.6 degrees Fahrenheit or 37 degrees Celsius) without the use of fever-reducing medications. As the sick person begins to feel better you may decide to stop giving fever-reducing medicines. Continue to monitor their temperature until the temperature has been normal for 24 hours.

**Q. Can the virus live on surfaces, such as computer keyboards?**

Yes, flu viruses may be spread when a person touches droplets left by coughs and sneezes on hard surfaces (such as desks or door knobs) or objects (such as keyboards or pens) and then touches his or her mouth or nose. However, it is not necessary to disinfect these surfaces beyond routine cleaning.

Clean surfaces and items which are more likely to have frequent hand contact, using standard cleaning agents for these areas.

**Q. How do I recognize a fever or signs of a fever?**

A fever is a temperature taken with a thermometer that is equal to or greater than 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius). If you are not able to measure a temperature, the sick person might have a fever if he or she

- feels warm,
- has a flushed appearance, or
- is sweating or shivering.

**Q. How long should a sick student or staff member be kept home?**

In the current flu conditions, students and staff with symptoms of flu should stay home for at least 24 hours *after* they no longer have fever or do not feel feverish, without using fever-reducing drugs.

Sick people should stay at home, except to go to the doctor's office, and should avoid contact with others. Keeping people with a fever at home may reduce the number of people who get infected. Because high temperatures are linked with higher amounts of virus, people with a fever may be more contagious.

**Q. Should family members of sick students stay home too?**

Not unless the flu conditions are determined to be more severe.

**Q. How will the decision be made to dismiss schools?**

The decision to dismiss students will be made at the community level. School officials will work closely with the Polk County Health Department and the Iowa Department of Education to make sound decisions, based on local conditions. The decision should consider:

- the number and severity of cases in an outbreak (looking at national, regional, and local data),
- the risks of flu spread and benefits of dismissal,
- the problems that school dismissal can cause for families and communities

**Q. How will our community know if the flu is more severe and that they need to consider taking additional action steps?**

CDC and the Polk County Health Department will be monitoring national data on the number of people who seek care for flu-like illness, as well as the number of hospitalizations and deaths. CDC will also look at the geographic spread of flu-like illness and will look for changes in the virus. In addition, CDC will compare data on a weekly basis with seasonal flu trends from other years and with data collected during the spring 2009 outbreak. State and local health departments will also be on the lookout for increases in severe illness in their areas.

**Q. Why would one school dismiss students and another school continue to remain open?**

School action steps could vary based on the severity of the pandemic and the impact it is having in the school. Decisions for school dismissal will be made at the community level, based on the number and severity of cases in the school and community. Because the impact of flu on a community will differ from location to location, the steps that are taken may also be different.

Also, certain schools may have a large number of students who are at high risk for complications from the flu (such as a school for pregnant teens). These schools may decide to close based on the local situation while other schools in the community remain open.

**Q. What can a parent do to prepare for flu during the 2009-2010 school year?**

- Plan for child care at home if your child gets sick or their school is dismissed.
- Plan to monitor the health of the sick child and any other children by checking for fever and other symptoms of flu.
- Update emergency contact lists.
- Identify a separate room in the house for care of sick family members. Consider designating a single person as the main caregiver for anyone who gets sick.
- Pull together games, books, DVDs and other items to keep your family entertained while at home.
- Talk to your school about their flu pandemic or emergency plan.
- Get your family vaccinated for seasonal flu and 2009 H1N1 flu when vaccines are available.

**Q. What will our school do to prepare for flu response during the 2009-2010 school year?**

- Review and revise existing pandemic plans and focus on protecting high risk students and staff.
- Develop a plan to cover key positions, such as the school nurse, when staff stay home because they are sick.
- Set up a separate room (a sick room) for care of sick students or staff until they can be sent home. Identify ways to increase the space between people.

- Purchase Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as masks for nurses and other staff providing care for sick people at school. Provide training for this staff about basic infection control and the use of PPE.
- Develop an education campaign to encourage hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette.
- Communicate regularly with parents and staff about decisions to send sick students home, how families can identify students who are at high-risk of complications from flu, how staff members can self-identify who is at high risk of complications from flu, or decisions to cancel mass gatherings. Remind parents and staff how long sick students and staff should remain at home.
- Develop a school dismissal plan and options for how school work can be continued at home (e.g., homework packets, web-based lessons, phone calls), if school is dismissed or students are sent home when sick. Communicate this plan to all community members who would be affected.
- Collaborate with the local health department, community organizations, local businesses, and social services on a plan for response.