

August 19, 2009

Dear Parents/Guardians,

Re: Pandemic H1N1 flu virus (swine flu) in schools

As children are starting a new school year, Ottawa Public Health continues to work closely with the schools and school boards in the city of Ottawa to monitor and manage the presence of the pandemic H1N1 flu virus (commonly referred to as swine flu). After a peak in H1N1 flu cases in June, we observed a decline in the number of new cases throughout the summer months. Cases so far have been relatively mild. As we head into the fall, we are assuming that the disease will remain mild, but we do not know whether the severity of the disease will change. We do know, however, that a small number of people have experienced severe disease requiring hospitalization, with half the cases in Ottawa occurring in children and young adults.

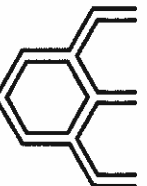
As part of ongoing enhanced surveillance measures for the pandemic H1N1 flu virus, Ottawa Public Health is meeting with school boards to review: infection prevention and control measures, management of the flu virus in schools and reporting of absenteeism rates in excess of 10 per cent. These reports have been tremendously helpful in preventing and managing outbreaks of infectious diseases in our community and schools in the past.

Parents and guardians have an important role to play in limiting the spread of the H1N1 virus among children. To ensure children's safe and healthy return to school, we ask you to take the following steps:

1. Teach your children to **prevent illness** by
 - Washing their hands frequently with soap and water for at least 15 seconds. A 60-90 per cent alcohol-based hand rub is also effective if hands are not visibly soiled.
 - Coughing or sneezing into their sleeve or arm – not their hands.
 - Not sharing things that go in the mouth, such as cups, juice boxes, water bottles, forks/spoons, musical instruments with mouthpieces, mouth guards, etc.
2. Ensure that your children **stay home when they experience flu-like symptoms** such as a fever over 38 C/100.4 F, a cough, muscle aches, fatigue, severe headache, sore throat, and lack of appetite. Make arrangements to have someone take care of your children at home when they are ill.
3. Report the absence to school officials and advise them of your children's symptoms.

To care for a sick child, do one of three things:

- If your child experiences **severe symptoms** such as shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, go to a hospital emergency.
- If your child has **moderate symptoms** such as severe fatigue and muscle aches combined with persistent cough and high fever – or if he or she has medical conditions that affect the lungs, heart or immune system – seek medical attention from your family physician or a primary care service provider.
- If your child has **mild symptoms** of the flu, keep him or her at home and provide the following care: give them plenty of fluids to help prevent dehydration, make sure they get adequate rest, limit their contact with other household members, ensure all family members wash their hands frequently, and clean frequently touched surfaces.



Your child may resume his or her regular activities when he or she no longer has a fever and is feeling better. The presence of a cough alone, in the absence of other symptoms, is not a reason to stay away from school. It is not unusual for individuals to experience a cough for days to weeks beyond the period of infection.

If you have questions about the flu or are unsure whether you should see a health care provider, please call the Ottawa Public Health Information Line at 613-580-6744.

Sincerely,

Dr. Isra Levy
Medical Officer of Health

