

Information Letter from the Minnesota Department of Health For Parents of Pre K – 12 Students

Dear Parent or Guardian:

During the coming school year, more people than usual in our schools and communities are likely to be getting sick with the flu (influenza). In addition to the regular “seasonal” influenza that comes around every fall, we are still likely to be seeing cases of the novel H1N1 influenza (“swine flu”) that first appeared last spring. Novel H1N1 flu never completely went away over the summer, so the flu season may start early this year.

Right now, H1N1 still seems to be acting like seasonal influenza in terms of how sick it makes people and how it is spread. Most people who have had novel H1N1 flu in Minnesota have gotten better without complications. However, like any flu virus, novel H1N1 can be a serious disease. Some people have been hospitalized with novel H1N1, and several deaths have occurred from it. Most people who had novel H1N1 in Minnesota have been school-aged children. People at high risk for complications from influenza (including seasonal and novel H1N1 influenza) are those with underlying medical conditions (such as heart, lung or kidney disease, asthma, diabetes, or a suppressed immune system), pregnant women, children under 5 years of (especially those under age 2) or people over age 65.

Influenza spreads when a person with the flu coughs or sneezes. You can help us prevent the spread of influenza at [school name] by taking the following important steps:

1. **Keep your child home if they have symptoms of the flu.** That means a fever of 100 degrees Fahrenheit or greater, with cough and/or a sore throat. You should check your child for these symptoms each morning before sending them to school (you may wish to use the attached screening form to help you). Students who have these symptoms at school *will be sent home*. Other symptoms that may occur with flu include runny nose, headache, body aches, vomiting and diarrhea (in addition to fever and cough or sore throat).
2. **Sick children should stay home** for at least 24 hours *after* their fever is gone without use of fever-reducing drugs like Tylenol or Motrin. Usually that means staying home for 5 to 7 days. Children should not come back to school if they are not well enough to participate in school activities, even if their fever has been gone for 24 hours. Children staying home with flu symptoms should also avoid contact with others except to get medical care. This includes staying away from after-school and other activities. Do not use aspirin or aspirin-containing products when your child has influenza symptoms.

Some additional important points:

- Children still need to stay home until their fever has been gone for 24 hours even if they are on antiviral drugs such as Tamiflu (oseltamivir) or have had a flu test that is negative. Flu tests are not always accurate.
- When you contact us to say that your child will be out sick, please let us know they have influenza-like illness (flu symptoms). This will help us know the amount of flu activity in the school.

- Children returning to school after an influenza-like illness will still be able to spread the illness, although less easily than when they had fever and flu symptoms. To avoid spreading the virus, it is very important that they clean their hands frequently, and cover coughs and sneezes with a sleeve or tissue while at school.
 - Plan ahead of time for child care arrangements for at least 7 days in case your child develops flu symptoms.
3. **Teach your child to clean their hands** often, with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub. They will need to use soap and water if their hands are soiled. We will remind them to clean their hands regularly during the school day. This is very important for every student – students who are well and students who are coming back to school after being sick.
 4. **Teach your child to cover coughs and sneezes.** They should use a tissue when one is available, but they can also cough or sneeze into an elbow or arm. Hands should not be used to cover a cough or sneeze.
 5. **Teach your child to avoid sharing personal items.** That includes items like drinks, food or eating utensils
 6. **If your child is at high risk for complications from influenza, you should plan to take some additional precautions.** This includes children with chronic health problems like asthma, diabetes, heart or lung disease, metabolic conditions, neurologic and neuromuscular disorders, and girls who are pregnant. Children younger than 5 years old are also at higher risk of complications from flu. If you are not sure whether your child is at higher risk, please check with a doctor.

If your child is at high risk:

- Contact your doctor immediately if your child develops flu symptoms. If your child needs antiviral drugs, they should be started within two days of symptoms for the best response.
 - Contact your doctor to see whether antiviral drugs are needed if your child has had close contact with others who have flu symptoms.
 - Remember that other children returning to school after a flu-like illness may still be able to spread the virus. Talk to your doctor now to develop a plan for flu that meets your child's individual health needs.
 - Remember, if someone else in your household is at high risk for complications from influenza, their doctor should be consulted to discuss a plan for what to do if they have close contact with someone with flu symptoms or develop flu symptoms.
7. **Vaccinate your child.** The Minnesota Department of Health recommends vaccinating *all children* against regular, seasonal influenza. That step is especially critical for children at high risk of influenza-related complications.

A separate vaccination will be needed for novel H1N1 influenza. The vaccine is likely to be available in late September or October. First priority for H1N1 vaccination will be given to pregnant women, people who live with or care for children younger than 6 months of age, people age 6 months to 24 years, people 25 through 64 years of age

with chronic health disorders or weakened immune systems, and health care providers. It is likely that two doses of H1N1 vaccine will be needed, given several weeks apart.

8. Learn how to care for a person with flu symptoms at home and when to seek medical attention. Check the CDC and MDH websites:

- http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/guidance_homecare.htm
- <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/flu/h1n1/basics/care>

If novel H1N1 influenza begins causing more severe disease, some of the recommendations in this letter may change. For example, children with flu symptoms may need to stay home longer – up to seven days, regardless of when their fever goes away. Some schools may even need to close, for as long as seven days or more. We will keep you informed if any of these steps become necessary.

For more information, visit the Minnesota Department of Health website at www.health.state.mn.us or the federal flu website at www.flu.gov. For more information about influenza in our community and what [name of school] is doing, visit [*school/health department website*] or call [*appropriate phone number*].