Pandemic Influenza Preparedness

# QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

August 21, 2009

Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport
Ministry of Health Services
Ministry of Education

## FOR PARENTS: H1N1 AND BACK-TO-SCHOOL

British Columbia continues to monitor the H1N1 flu virus situation in the province. Many cases have been confirmed in British Columbia and the vast majority of these patients have either recovered or are recovering.

**Q: What are the symptoms of H1N1?**

- The symptoms of the H1N1 flu virus are similar to the symptoms of regular seasonal influenza and include high fever, cough, headache, general aches, sore throat, fatigue, eye pain, shortness of breath and, in younger children, lack of appetite.

- Some people with the H1N1 flu have also reported runny nose, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

**Q: What precautions should I take to help prevent my child from getting sick?**

- As very young children (under the age of 5) and children with chronic health conditions may be at higher risk for more severe illness or complications from the H1N1 flu virus, parents should take them to visit their doctor prior to the fall to make a plan for what to do if they become ill with influenza. This may include discussing with your doctor whether they should be prescribed antivirals ahead of time to use in the event they show H1N1 flu symptoms and where to call to get medical advice.

- It's also important all parents review with their children the standard hygiene and prevention measures.

- It's helpful to talk to kids about common sense measures that can help protect them from getting the flu:
    - Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze; throw the tissue in the trash after you use it. If you don't have a tissue, try to cough or sneeze into your sleeve rather than your bare hands.
    - Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze and before you eat. Alcohol-based hand sanitizer is also effective if your hands aren't visibly dirty.
    - Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
    - If you get sick, stay home and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them.
    - Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread more easily with contact to these areas.
    - Don't share the same cup or utensils with other people.
    - Encourage children to tell you if they don't feel well, and to stay home from school if they are sick.
    - Be a role model! Adults should make sure they wash their hands properly and sneeze into a tissue or their elbow to set a good example for kids.

**Q: What should I do if my child has the flu?**

- Unless they need medical attention, keep children who are sick at home. Don't send them to school or day care.

- Have them drink frequents small amounts of liquid (juice, soups, water, Pedialyte ®).

- Keep the sick child comfortable. Rest is important.

- For fever, sore throat, and muscle aches, you can use fever-reducing medicines that your doctor recommends based on your child's age. Do not use aspirin with children or teenagers.

- If someone in your home is sick, keep them away from those who are not sick.

- Keep tissues close to the sick person and have a trash bag within reach for disposing of used tissues.

**Q: If my child is sick with the flu, how long should he or she be kept away from school and work?**

- The best thing you can do if your child or any member of the family is sick with an influenza-like illness is for them to stay home from school and daycare and stay away from other people until they are feeling better and able to fully participate in normal activities.

- If your child gets sick, be sure to keep him/her home from school or daycare until they are no longer showing symptoms.

**Q: Will schools be closed to limit the spread of the human swine flu virus?**

- Based on the experience to date about the current H1N1 situation, public health officials in B.C. do not anticipate that closures of individual schools, community-wide closures, or province-wide closures will be useful for controlling the transmission and impact of the H1N1 flu virus.

- Public health officials are watching this virus very carefully and while more people are expected to get sick in the next few months, right now most people have recovered at home without having to go to hospital.

- Provincial health officials are encouraging students, parents and schools to continue taking practical, common sense steps to prevent the spread of illness. It's also recommended that students, teachers and staff who are sick stay at home to reduce the risk of spreading infection.

- As with any flu or illness, the key is to be aware of the symptoms and, if children get sick, keep them home until they're feeling better.

**Q: Who decides if schools get closed?**

- If there are unusual circumstances that call for a school to be closed, this would be a decision made by the local Medical Health Officer in consultation with the Provincial Health Officer and local school district.

**Q: Last year there were some school closures due to H1N1 outbreaks. How come these same situations might not result in closures this year?**

- Closures early last spring were done out of an abundance of caution because there was very little information on the disease at that time. It has since become apparent that, in general, the H1N1 flu virus does not warrant such severe measures.

- School closures are very aggressive measures to reduce influenza transmission. While they may be used during periods of uncertainty as a precaution, they have not been established as effective in the control of influenza.

**Q: Should my child use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer?**

- While alcohol-based hand sanitizers can be a useful supplement when soap and water are not available, it's important to note that they do not replace simple hand washing. Research has shown that vigorously washing your hands with soap and water is a more reliable and effective way to keep your hands clean.

- If hands have visible dirt on them then alcohol-based hand sanitizers don't work as well and may not kill the influenza virus.

**Q: My child came home from school saying things are much worse than health officials say they are. What can I believe?**

- Public health officials are watching this virus very carefully and while more people are expected to get sick in the next few months, right now most people have recovered at home without having to go to hospital.

- If things change, public health officials will let everyone know and provide advice on the things to do to stay well. As well, this virus can be treated with medications and there will be a vaccine available in a few months.

You can call HealthLink BC at 8-1-1, 24 hours a day/seven days a week to speak to a nurse if you have more questions or are concerned about any illness/symptoms experienced by you or your children.

For the latest facts on the H1N1 flu virus, including back-to-school information, visit www.gov.bc.ca/h1n1.

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