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## 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 frequent 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?**

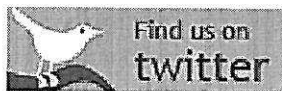
- While alcohol-based hand sanitizers can be a useful supplement when soap and water are not available, it's important to note that they do not replace simple hand washing. Research has shown that vigorously washing your hands with soap and water is a more reliable and effective way to keep your hands 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](http://HealthLinkBC.ca) 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](http://www.gov.bc.ca/h1n1).



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### PROTECTING YOUR KIDS FROM THE H1N1 FLU VIRUS

The H1N1 flu virus (human swine flu) is a type of influenza that can cause respiratory disease that can spread between people. Young children, pregnant women and people with chronic diseases like asthma, diabetes or heart disease, may be at higher risk for complications from this infection. In most children, the symptoms of the H1N1 flu virus are similar to the symptoms of seasonal influenza. They include:

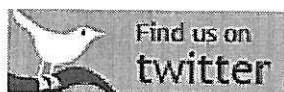
- Fever
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Body aches
- Headache
- Chills and fatigue
- Occasionally, vomiting and diarrhea

Flu viruses spread from person to person mainly through droplets from the coughing or sneezing of a sick person. Flu viruses may also be spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with the virus and then touches his or her eyes, nose or mouth. The H1N1 flu vaccine is expected to arrive in British Columbia in November and be available to everyone who needs and wants it. In the meantime, there are everyday actions that can help prevent the spread of germs that cause respiratory illnesses like the H1N1 flu virus:

- Teach your children to wash their hands frequently with soap and water for 20 seconds. Be sure to set a good example by doing this yourself.
- Teach your children to cough and sneeze into a tissue or into the inside of their elbow. Be sure to set a good example by doing this yourself.
- Teach your children to stay at least two metres (six feet) away from people who are sick.
- Children who are sick should stay home from school and daycare and stay away from other people until they are better.

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### IF YOU THINK YOUR CHILD MAY HAVE THE H1N1 FLU VIRUS

In most children, the symptoms of the H1N1 flu virus are similar to the symptoms of regular seasonal flu. They include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Body aches
- Headache
- Chills and fatigue
- Occasionally, vomiting and diarrhea

If your child is sick:

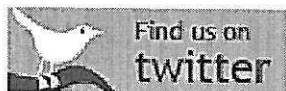
- Unless they need medical attention, keep children who are sick at home. Don't send them to school or day care.
- Have them drink plenty of liquid (juice, soups, Pedialyte®).
- Keep the sick child comfortable. Rest is important.
- For fever, sore throat, and muscle aches, you can use fever-reducing medicines that your doctor recommends based on your child's age. Do not use aspirin with children or teenagers; it can cause Reye's syndrome, a life-threatening illness.
- 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 used tissues.

If your child experiences any of the following warning signs, seek emergency medical care:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish or gray skin colour
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that he or she does not want to be held
- Not urinating or no tears when crying
- Their symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough

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### **HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH H1N1-RELATED STRESS**

Teachers and parents may notice changes in the behaviour of children that could indicate kids are afraid or having a hard time coping with recent news regarding the H1N1 flu virus. Children may not be able to explain how they are feeling and may not notice any differences in how they are behaving. Developed by the Province's Disaster Psychosocial Project, listed below are some behaviours teachers and parents might observe if children become stressed.

#### **Elementary Students (ages 4-12)**

- Emotions such as feeling more afraid, scared or sad
- Feeling anxious, tense, upset or having a stomach ache or headache
- Excessive preoccupation with getting the flu and asking for reassurance from parents or teachers
- Clinging to parents/caregivers and having trouble separating at school

#### **Junior – Senior High School Students (ages 13-18)**

- Emotions such as being scared, irritable or sad
- Worrying and having concerns that they might get sick or family and friends might become ill
- Thinking about what might happen in Canada and the world
- Feeling anxious, tense, upset or impatient
- Having physical complaints of a stomach ache or headache
- Excessive preoccupation with getting the flu, including reading internet and news articles about the flu, checking with parents/teachers around symptoms and requesting to leave school
- Behaviour changes such as becoming more easily frustrated, quicker to lose their temper and being less compliant with daily routine and requests

Parents and teachers may want to try some of the following suggestions to help children cope with the feelings and behaviours they are experiencing:

- Acknowledge children's fears
- Allow a limited time for discussion if appropriate and then proceed with the regular schedule for the day
- Provide reassurance by telling children lots of people are working hard to keep them safe
- Maintain daily routines at home and at school as children and teens thrive on structure
- Be calm and a model of confidence as children learn to cope by watching how the significant adults in their lives cope in times of stress. Young children take their cues from parents/caregivers and other significant adults in their lives as to how scary things are based on parents'/caregivers' reactions.
- Provide information your children/students can understand

- Limit exposure to news stories and images as these are not designed for delivery to children and younger audiences
- Reinforce things children can do to protect themselves such as hand washing and coughing into their sleeve
- Encourage questions

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