



## **Additional information for special school principals on swine influenza A (H1N1)**

This information sheet contains additional information about swine flu as well as addressing questions that may arise about access to the vaccine and issues concerning staff.

### **What is swine flu?**

Swine flu is a respiratory illness caused by a new strain of the influenza virus. This new strain has been named pandemic (H1N1) 2009 by the World Health Organization.

### **What are the symptoms of swine flu?**

The symptoms of swine flu are similar to the symptoms of normal, human seasonal flu and include fever or history of fever equal to or greater than 38°C and two or more of the following:

- cough
- sore throat
- runny nose
- aches and pains
- headaches
- vomiting/diarrhoea

### **What measures can protect against infection?**

General infection control practices and good respiratory hand hygiene can help to reduce transmission of all viruses, including swine flu. These include:

- covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue when possible;
- disposing of used tissues promptly and carefully;
- maintaining good basic hygiene, such as washing your hands frequently with soap and water to reduce the spread of the virus from hands to your face or to other people;
- cleaning hard surfaces such as door handles frequently using your usual cleaning product;
- making sure children in your care follow this advice.

### **How is swine flu treated?**

If the illness is mild and there are no underlying risk factors then it can often be managed like normal flu by staying in bed and taking over the counter preparations. However those with underlying conditions and with more serious disease should stay at home and telephone their GP or out-of-hours service.

*It is important that they do not go to their GP's surgery or to an accident and emergency department, but that they stay at home where, if necessary, they will be visited by a doctor.*

**Northern Ireland swine flu helpline: 0800 0514 142**



### **Is there a swine flu vaccine?**

Approval for swine flu vaccines has been granted by the European Medicines Agency. The following groups have been prioritised for vaccination:

1. Individuals aged between six months and 65 years in the current seasonal flu clinical at-risk groups.
2. All pregnant women.
3. Household contacts of immunocompromised individuals.
4. People aged 65 and over in the current seasonal flu vaccine clinical at-risk groups.

In addition to these groups front line health and social care workers have been prioritised to receive the vaccine with the first clinical group as they are at increased risk of infection and of transmitting that infection to susceptible patients.

### **Does swine flu particularly affect children and young people?**

Swine flu is particularly affecting children and young adults. Children are proving to be highly efficient carriers of the swine flu virus and schools provide the perfect environment for it to spread. There is also some evidence that there is less natural resilience to the virus in children and young people.

### **What action should be taken if a child develops flu-like symptoms while at school?**

If a child develops flu-like symptoms at school, arrangements should be made for them to be taken home as soon as possible. While waiting, they should be placed in a suitable area, such as a medical room or small office (in order to reduce the chance of spreading infection to other children), but where they can be kept under observation.

Their parents should be advised to take the child straight home and if necessary to telephone their GP or out of hours service.

Some children in special schools may live a considerable distance away and it may be some time before parents can take them home, or they may require access to adapted transport. In such circumstances staff should make arrangements for the child to be looked after in school until they can return home.



### **What about children who have underlying health problems?**

There are a number of children who may be at increased risk as a result of their underlying health conditions. Those children will be among the first priority groups to receive the vaccine. Children who are vulnerable to infection (eg those with respiratory illness, renal problems or compromised immune systems) and who develop flu-like symptoms will receive appropriate treatment. They should remain at home where they may require ongoing clinical assessment. Detailed medical advice for individual children can also be discussed with community paediatricians. School attendance of children with coordinated care packages should be discussed on an individual basis with the GP and care manager in the local Health and Social Care Trust. If children need hospitalisation, the hospital should be informed that the child has suspected flu so that they can be appropriately isolated and treated.

### **Should the school close if there are children and young people with swine flu?**

School closures are not recommended at this time because the virus is becoming increasingly widespread in the community. People are likely to be repeatedly exposed to the virus in their everyday lives – closing the school will no longer be effective in slowing the spread of the virus as people could still be exposed outside the school.

In some special circumstances, for example a school with children who are particularly vulnerable to infection or because there are insufficient staff members, a decision may be made to close the school. A wide range of factors, including the vaccination status of pupils, will be considered before taking such a decision. However, it is important to point out that swine flu has in most cases been a relatively mild illness. As far as possible schools should plan to manage 'business as usual'.

### **Should children who have had contact with a known case of swine flu be kept away from school?**

No. As long as they are well and not suffering from flu-like symptoms, there is no reason for these children to be kept away from school and they can carry on with their normal routine.

Parents should, however, be vigilant for flu symptoms and, at the first signs of these, should keep the child at home and, if necessary, telephone their GP or out-of-hours service.

### **Should a member of staff attend school if they have a close contact that has been diagnosed with swine flu?**

As long as they are well and are not suffering from flu-like symptoms, they can continue with their normal duties.

**What action should be taken if a member of staff develops flu-like symptoms?**

If a member of staff develops flu-like symptoms at work, they should report their symptoms to their line manager and go home. If a member of staff develops symptoms at home they should inform their line manager (by telephone) that they are unfit for work. If they have underlying health conditions, are pregnant or are very unwell they should telephone their GP or out-of-hours service. If they are otherwise healthy they should be able to recover at home with the usual flu remedies. If their symptoms do not improve, they should telephone their GP or out-of-hours service. They should finish any treatment and return to work when they are symptom-free, but no sooner than 5–7 days after the initial symptoms appeared and provided they have completed their course of antivirals, if prescribed.

**Is it safe for pregnant teachers to continue to teach if a pupil or another member of staff has been diagnosed with swine flu, or has come into close contact with a case?**

There is no overall excess risk to pregnant women from teaching than they face in the community. In schools the emphasis should be on ensuring that symptomatic children are identified, isolated and sent home. It is however sensible for pregnant women to avoid close contact with those who have symptoms of the flu. Pregnant women should be aware of the signs and symptoms of swine flu so that they can telephone for early medical advice and, if indicated, treatment. As pregnant women are in the priority group, pregnant teachers who wish to avail of the vaccine should be facilitated.

**What about the families of children with special needs?**

In certain situations it may be appropriate to offer vaccination to families of children with special needs. In other circumstances it may also be necessary to offer medication such as Tamiflu where a child is at higher risk of complications related to influenza. In these circumstances the need will be assessed by the GP in conjunction with the Public Health Agency.

**Should hand sanitisers be provided in schools?**

What is most important is that all schools have proper hand washing and drying facilities in their toilets at all times, including hot and cold water, liquid soap and paper towels or hot air dryers. It is not necessary to provide hand sanitisers, however should a school choose to do so, it is important to note that they are not a substitute for good hand washing facilities.



**Where is further information available?**

The Northern Ireland swine flu helpline will operate between 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday on Tel: 0800 0514 142.

More general information can be obtained from various websites, including:

Public Health Agency  
[www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)

Health Protection Agency  
[www.hpa.org.uk](http://www.hpa.org.uk)

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety  
[www.dhsspsni.gov.uk](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk)

Department of Education  
[www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk)

World Health Organization  
[www.who.int](http://www.who.int)

Teachernet  
[www.teachernet.gov.uk](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk)