

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS about H1N1 FLU

### 1. What is the current status of the H1N1 influenza virus?

Over the past summer, the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control have continued to monitor the spread of the H1N1 virus, commonly called Swine Flu, which surfaced in the U.S. last spring. H1N1 continues to circulate widely. A significant number of H1N1 cases were documented during the summer, a time when flu is generally absent. The United States reported the largest number of cases of any country worldwide. Most cases have not been severe and are comparable in severity to seasonal influenza.

### 2. Why is there so much concern about the flu this year?

Predictions are we will be dealing with two different strains of flu this year. There is the regular seasonal flu, which can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. Seasonal flu can occur as early as October, and generally peaks in January or later. There is a vaccine for this seasonal strain of the flu.

The novel H1N1 flu, which manifests with symptoms such as fever, cough, sore throat, headaches, tiredness, runny or stuffy nose and body aches, is a new strain of influenza virus. Currently there is no vaccine for this new strain, although one is being tested. Until a vaccine is available, there is greater risk of this strain spreading quickly and affecting more people. Even when the vaccine becomes available, supplies may be limited or the virus could mutate making the vaccine ineffective.

### 3. Is there anything that can be done to prevent students and staff from getting the flu?

The CDC continues to stress the preventative measures that the school system has been advocating and practicing for the past several years:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze
- Wash your hands often with soap and water. If water is not near, use an alcohol-based hand cleaner
- Refrain from touching your eyes, nose, and mouth
- Stay home if you are ill

The best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccination each year.

### 4. What will schools do if it appears a student is coming down with the flu?

When teachers or other staff members have concerns about a student's health, they should send that student to the health room immediately. If a student is coughing, has a runny or stuffy nose or complains of a sore throat, headache, tiredness or body aches, health staff will check to see if they have a fever (100°F or higher) or have other influenza-like symptoms. The CDC recommends that schools limit the number of staff members who care for ill students before they can be sent home. The HCPSS will follow this recommendation.

## **5. Is it recommended that students and staff wear masks to avoid getting the flu?**

Facemasks are not designed to protect against breathing in very small particles in aerosols that may contain viruses, but to help stop droplets from being spread by the person wearing them. Therefore the CDC is not recommending the use of facemasks in community and home settings to restrict the spread of influenza.

The CDC is recommending the use of respiratory protection in occupational healthcare settings, therefore HCPSS health assistants and nurses will be wearing facemasks when evaluating students/staff with influenza-like illness. Students who are sent to the health room and are found to have fever of 100° or above, will be asked to wear a mask until a parent or guardian can pick them up.

While facemasks are not recommended, students who choose to wear them in school will be allowed to do so. Facemasks should be used once and then thrown away in the trash.

## **6. How long should a sick student stay home from school?**

On August 5, CDC revised its recommendation about how long people with flu-like illness should stay home and away from other people to prevent spreading the flu. CDC now recommends that those with flu-like illness stay home until they are fever-free (under 100°F) for at least 24 hours, without using fever-reducing medicines like acetaminophen or ibuprofen. People give off more flu virus when they have a fever, so staying home during this time will be especially important.

Previously, CDC had recommended that people stay home for seven days after they became ill or 24 hours after they had no symptoms. The change in recommendation is based on what health officials learned about the new H1N1 virus during spring 2009 and is designed to decrease the risk of spreading the flu while also reducing the disruption to society caused by people staying home for long periods.

During spring 2009, most people infected with the new H1N1 flu had fevers for 2-4 days. By tailoring the recommendation to how long someone with flu has a fever, people with less severe illnesses will be able to return to their daily lives sooner, while also protecting others from the flu during their most contagious period. The new recommendation applies to camps, schools, businesses and other community settings where most people are not at high risk for flu complications.

## **7. If I suspect my child has the H1N1 virus, do I have to report the information to someone?**

This year, in addition to monitoring student attendance, schools are being asked to collect more information about student illness. As part of the Health Department's tracking of Influenza Like Illness in Howard County, schools are required to report numbers of student illness and symptoms. Data collected in schools will be provided to the Health Department. If your child is absent from school because of illness, please contact the school on the first day of absence and provide the following information:

- Your child's name
- The date
- Symptoms of influenza like illness: i.e. fever greater than 100° F, cough, sore throat
- Any other illness symptoms - gastrointestinal, headache, etc.

## **8. If there is a widespread outbreak of H1N1, is there a chance that schools might be closed?**

That is a possibility if a school or the school system begins to experience a high level of absenteeism. As with any situation involving communicable disease, the school system takes direction from the local health department. The Health Department advises school officials regarding individual student exclusion criteria, monitoring student absenteeism, school closings and other related issues.

## **9. Is the school system taking any special precautions?**

People can sometimes get flu if they touch droplets left on hard surfaces and objects by those who are ill and then touch their eyes, nose or mouth. Studies have shown that influenza virus can survive on environmental surfaces and can infect a person for up to 2-8 hours after being deposited on the surface.

The HCPSS follows the CDC recommendation to routinely clean areas that students and staff touch often with typically used cleaners. Special cleaning with bleach and other special cleaners is not necessary. The CDC stresses that environmental cleaning should not be the primary focus of influenza prevention activities, therefore the school system will continue to stress good hygiene practices.

## **10. What is the status of the flu vaccine supply and the development of the new H1N1 vaccine?**

Seasonal flu mist vaccination is currently available. In collaboration with the Howard County Health Department, the flu mist will be administered in Howard County elementary schools beginning September 22 and 24, 2009 to students with parent/guardian permission.

Vaccination for H1N1 is currently being tested and may only be available by injection. Currently we are collaborating with the HCHD regarding availability and how the vaccine will be administered. The vaccine is expected to be available in mid to late October.

## **11. Who will be vaccinated when the H1N1 vaccination becomes available?**

It may take several months for production of the H1N1 vaccine to gear up, therefore the CDC has identified those groups that are most at risk based on current disease patterns. According to the CDC, initial vaccination efforts will focus on five key populations:

- All persons 6 months through 24 years of age
- Persons who live with or care for children younger than 6 month of age
- All pregnant women
- Healthcare and emergency services personnel
- People aged 25 through 64 who have health conditions associated with higher risk of medical complications from influenza

## **12. How will parents be notified of changes or updates to H1N1 flu information?**

School officials learned last year that information coming from the CDC changes quickly and therefore we are prepared to share updates as soon as new information becomes available.

- The *Healthy Kids, Healthy Schools* brochure, which describes what schools are doing and what families can do to support healthy schools, was sent home with students again this year.
- The HCPSS Public Information Office will send out e-mail updates via HCPSS News to parents as necessary.
- The most current information and links to resources are posted on the school system website at [www.hcpss.org](http://www.hcpss.org).