

From the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit
Questions & Answers for Families with School-Age Children
(Current as of October 29, 2009)

What is H1N1 Flu?

H1N1 flu—which has also been called swine flu—is a respiratory illness that causes symptoms similar to regular seasonal flu.

In Ontario, the majority of cases of H1N1 flu have been reported in healthy young adults and most cases have been mild. People between 5 and 24 years of age make up a larger proportion of cases compared to other age groups. Younger children are most at risk of getting an infection, likely due to the lack of hand hygiene and proper cough/sneeze etiquette.

What are the signs and symptoms?

- Fever
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Muscle aches and joint pain
- Feeling extremely tired
- Runny nose, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea
- Lack of appetite

Is H1N1 Flu contagious? How does it spread between people?

This virus can be spread from person to person. It is believed to be spread the same way as seasonal influenza—through droplets from a cough or sneeze. It is important for parents to remind children to wash their hands with soap and water, and to cough and sneeze into their upper sleeve. It is also important to keep ill children home. This includes not sending them to school, sports or extra-curricular activities, or to public spaces like recreational centres and malls.

How long should those ill stay away from school?

Students, staff and volunteers should stay home until their fever has been gone for at least 24 hours and they are feeling well enough to do normal activities. Some people may experience a cough for days to weeks after an infection. Those with just a cough can return to school.

Is there increased risk of illness for pregnant women or volunteers and those with chronic health issues?

To date the research shows that pregnant women and those with chronic illnesses are not more likely to catch the virus but they do appear to be at somewhat higher risk of complications should they get H1N1 flu—just like they are at higher risk of complications from seasonal flu.

It is not recommended that they stay home from school or work unless they are ill. It is important that they practice proper hand hygiene.

What you can do to reduce the risk of infection and help your family stay healthy:

- Wash your hands for at least 15 seconds and often with soap and water—use hand sanitizer if you can't wash
- Sneeze and cough into your upper sleeve—not your hands—or use a tissue to cover your mouth and nose
- Stay at home if you are ill
- Speak to your health care provider about flu immunization
- See your health care provider if you or your child are experiencing severe influenza-like symptoms

When should students, staff and volunteers practice hand hygiene?

Students, staff and volunteers should practice hand hygiene:

- Before eating lunch or snacks
- Before and after preparing food
- After using the washroom
- After sneezing or coughing
- After wiping a child's nose
- Before and after using shared computers, sports equipment, etc.

What specific plans are in place in the schools?

Schools will follow usual practices including:

- Identifying ill children in the school and separating them from others while the parents/guardians/designated alternates are called
- Advising parents/guardians to have their child stay home until feeling better
- Reminding students daily of the importance of regular, thorough hand hygiene, cough and sneeze etiquette, and to avoid touching their eyes, mouths and noses
- Encouraging students to avoid sharing of food, beverages and other personal items

The school boards, schools and the health unit are working together to monitor the level of illness in schools and to plan if any actions are needed.

What measures are caretakers taking to clean and disinfect schools?

Caretakers will continue to provide thorough and effective cleaning and disinfecting of schools as part of their routine duties. The influenza virus is easily killed by regular cleaning products and does not require special cleaning or disinfecting.

Can students wear masks at school?

There is no health reason for wearing masks. We are concerned about the fear and anxiety that may result from wearing masks, especially among young children. Parents who feel strongly about wanting their children to wear masks should discuss this with their school administrator.

The Public Health Agency of Canada does not recommend that the general public wear surgical masks to protect against getting H1N1 flu. Evidence shows that this is not effective in preventing transmission of influenza in the general public.

Will clubs and extra-curricular activities be cancelled?

Extra-curricular activities will continue at this time. Ill students and staff should not be attending activities until they are feeling better and no longer have a fever.

Will schools be closed by public health?

What we know about the current spread of the H1N1 flu virus is that the illness remains mild with most people being sick for a short period of time. School closures are not recommended at this time. The health unit will be monitoring the situation closely during the fall and any recommendations for closure will be based on current local evidence.

Where can I get more information about H1N1flu?

- Contact Your Health Connection at the health unit 721-7520 or 1-877-721-7520 (Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) or visit www.simcoemuskokahealth.org
- Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term www.health.gov.on.ca
- Caring for Kids, Canadian Paediatric Society <http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/immunization/H1N1.htm>
- Public Health Agency of Canada www.phac-aspc.gc.ca
- Service Ontario INFOline at 1-800-476-9708 (for general information on H1N1 flu)
- Telehealth at 1-866-797-0000 if you have flu-like symptoms, or call your health care provider.