

May 3, 2009 Update # 9

Swine Flu H1N1 (SIV) Infections - Update # 9 May 3, 2009

Updated Guidance on School/Child Care Closures for Swine Flu H1N1

Background

Over the past week, consistent with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Washington State Department of Health (DOH), public health officials in several Washington counties have recommended temporary closure of schools when there was a student with a confirmed or suspected case of Swine Flu H1N1. At the onset of this outbreak of a previously unknown influenza virus, it was prudent to close affected schools while learning more about the characteristics of this new disease and the strategy for community measures to prevent illness. The closures helped to decrease spread of infection in the schools and have provided valuable time for us to gather information about this new H1N1 influenza strain in our community. Because Thurston County has not yet had a confirmed or suspected case, no schools have been closed by the Health Department.

Based on information we have gathered from national, state and local officials, Thurston County Public Health is issuing this guidance for responding to the new Swine Flu H1N1 strain in schools and child care. We are not necessarily recommending the closure of individual schools or districts based on diagnosis of the first Swine Flu H1N1 case in students or staff. Although decisions will be made on a school-by-school basis, we expect that in most schools we will recommend a policy that focuses on keeping all students/staff with symptoms of influenza out of school during their period of illness and recuperation, when they are potentially infectious to others. This guidance is an enhanced version of the approach used during the yearly influenza season.

- Special circumstances in an individual school (such as a large spike in absenteeism from flu-like symptoms) may result in closure, but this is not the default recommendation based on the first few confirmed or suspected cases.
- All closure decisions will be made through active collaboration between school officials and public health.

Recommendations for disease control measures in the community, including schools, are informed by what we know today about the illness and its spread, and the practicality and consequences of the measures, including personal, family and community disruption. Two important points stand out:

1. Epidemiological information from case investigations and surveillance (statewide and nationally) suggests that this new Swine Flu H1N1 strain has spread more widely in communities and will continue, at least for a time, to be transmitted from person to person, including children.
2. Available information from health care providers, emergency departments and hospitals, as well as information from other states, suggests that **so far** the severity of illness from the new Swine Flu H1N1 strain is not greater than the typical seasonal influenza that circulates in our community every year.

May 3, 2009 Update # 9

Widespread school closures makes less sense at this time in the outbreak given what we are observing about disease transmission and the severity of illness currently associated with this Swine Flu H1N1 strain. If this strain of influenza was severe enough to require school closure upon diagnosis of the first case, all schools should probably be closed. Closing the schools where cases happen to be diagnosed first, while leaving most schools with undiagnosed cases open, does not make sense as an ongoing influenza control strategy in our community for this strain. Public health officials are acutely aware of the educational and economic disruption caused by a school closure, and are committed to using that approach only when truly necessary. At the same time, public health officials are continuing to monitor the situation and will alter guidance as needed as the situation changes. Our priority continues to be the protection of our community's health.

Recommendations for Management of Swine Flu H1N1 in Schools and Child Care

- Each morning, all parents/caregivers should assess all family members and especially all school-age children for symptoms of influenza (fever and cough or sore throat cough) or other symptoms that might be influenza.
- Each morning all school and child care staff should assess themselves for symptoms of influenza.
- Students or staff with influenza-like illness (fever and cough or sore throat) should stay home and not attend school. All sick students and staff should stay out of school for at least 7 days even if their symptoms resolve sooner. Students and staff who are still sick at 7 days should continue to stay home from school until at least 24 hours after they have completely recovered.
- If a child or adult is ill with other symptoms, they should stay home at least 1 day to observe how the illness develops and until completely well for 24 hours. A few cases of Swine Flu H1N1 began as a gastro-intestinal illness.
- Schools should screen students and staff for visible signs of possible influenza illness upon arrival at school. Public health can provide screening checklists and other tools to assist schools in implementing these measures.
- Students and staff who appear ill at arrival or become ill at school should be promptly isolated and sent home.
- Persons who are ill should stay home and not go into the community unless they need medical care. Ill students should not attend alternative child care or be in community venues.
- As always, situations can be individualized and school authorities may close school at their discretion. Parents may use their judgment regarding the risk and benefits of sending their children to school during this influenza outbreak as they would during a seasonal influenza outbreak.
- As is the practice with seasonal influenza, schools may be closed if larger numbers of students or staff become ill and school functioning becomes disrupted.

It is important to remember that even "routine" seasonal influenza can be a severe disease. Each year in the United States more than 200,000 people are hospitalized for flu-related complications; and about 36,000 people die from flu-related causes. Given this fact, unfortunately, as in every influenza season, we need to be prepared for the possibility of additional cases including severe cases and deaths. Preventing the spread of influenza requires all of us – schools, families, businesses, and government – to cooperate and work together.

COMMUNICABLE DISEASE UPDATE

COMMUNICABLE DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION SECTION
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May 3, 2009 Update # 9

For the most up-to-date information for Thurston County, the Health Department is encouraging calls to the Swine Flu H1N1 Public Information Line 360-709-3080 and visits to the Swine Flu H1N1 Webpage www.co.thurston.wa.us/health

Report all suspect cases to 24 hour recorded line at 360-786-5470
