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Preventing Influenza in New York City's Schools

Information for Parents, Teachers, and School Principals

What is the city doing to keep the schools safe from H1N1 influenza?

The Health Department and the Department of Education are working with schools, parents and communities to minimize the spread of H1N1 and seasonal flu among children and teachers. Our key objectives are to get children vaccinated, keep them home when sick, and ensure that they practice good hygiene, covering coughs and sneezes with sleeves or tissues and washing their hands frequently.

What steps will you take to achieve those objectives?

Each of the city's 1,500 public schools will start the year with an influenza-prevention campaign that includes posters and classroom instruction on covering coughs and washing hands. Restrooms will be stocked with soap and paper towels, and parents will get written reminders to keep their children home when they're sick. The City will also explore the possibility of making alcohol-based hand sanitizer available in schools.

Do I need to get my child vaccinated against seasonal flu?

The Health Department strongly urges students to get vaccinated against seasonal influenza early in the school year. The seasonal vaccine is already available in many doctors' offices. It is safe and effective against the most common strains of influenza. Families that lack health care coverage can get free or low-cost vaccine from public clinics and other sites throughout the city. For information on where to get children vaccinated, call 311 or visit www.nyc.gov/flu.

Do I need to get my child vaccinated against H1N1 influenza?

The decision is voluntary, but the Health Department strongly encourages all parents to get their children immunized against H1N1 influenza when vaccine becomes available this fall. The City will distribute the vaccine to health care providers and may also offer free vaccination to school-aged children. The current plan is to offer on-site vaccination to students in all NYC elementary schools, public and non-public. The City will also offer vaccine to middle-school and high-school students at one or more central sites in each borough. Each school or center will hold two vaccination sessions, approximately four weeks apart. Timing and logistics will depend on the supply of H1N1 vaccine and the availability of staff to administer it. No child will be vaccinated without the consent of a parent or guardian.

How are the vaccines administered?

Health officials recommend that all children aged 6 months to 18 years get two separate vaccinations this year: one for seasonal influenza and one for H1N1 influenza. Each vaccine can be given as a shot or inhaled in a nasal spray. A screening questionnaire will help determine if the shot or nasal spray is best for your child.

How many doses are required?

For children 9 and older, one dose of seasonal influenza vaccine is usually enough to provide immunity. Some children under age 9 may need 2 doses, 4 weeks apart, for full protection. Ask your doctor what is right for your child. The separate H1N1 vaccine will probably require 2 doses, given at least 3 weeks apart.

How will you secure parental consent for vaccination?

Consent forms will be posted online, at www.nyc.gov/flu, and paper copies will be sent home with students. Parents will fill them out and send them back to the school nurse with their children. Consent forms will also be available on site at central vaccination centers for middle and high school students.

How will you handle school closures this school year?

The Department of Education and the Health Department have established an open school policy. This means that when the flu returns, we do not plan to close schools with high levels of flu activity. Instead, we will work with parents and other members of the school community to keep our schools open, while also taking steps to reduce the spread of influenza within schools.

You closed a lot of schools last spring. Why is this year different?

Schools don't normally close on account of influenza. The Health Department recommended some temporary closures last spring because H1N1 was a new virus and its potential impact was unknown. Now that H1N1 is better understood, experts agree that conventional infection-control measures are more appropriate than school closure.

Will you ever close schools under any circumstances?

Not until we have employed other effective strategies to keep students safe. We will closely monitor influenza activity within schools. If 4% (at least 15) of a school's students are sent home with fever with a cough or sore throat on a single day, a doctor or supervising nurse will visit the school to assess the situation. This health supervisor will work with the principal to educate parents about the need to keep children home when sick and will confirm that the school is practicing recommended infection control measures.

The health supervisor will also identify students and staff members who may be at risk of complications from influenza because they have other health conditions, and ensure that measures are in place to protect them. These measures would include reminding them to

contact a medical provider to discuss the possibility of preventive treatment with antiviral drugs, and to seek treatment promptly if stricken with influenza-like illness. If these measures do not appear adequate to protect vulnerable students and staff, the Health Department may consider school closure as a last resort.

What can parents do to prepare for the fall influenza season?

- Arrange for child care in advance, in case your children get sick and need to stay home.
- Get your child vaccinated against H1N1 and seasonal flu as soon as vaccine is available.
- Teach your children to wash their hands often. Washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds is ideal (roughly the time it takes to sing the Happy Birthday song twice).
- Teach your children to keep their hands away from their faces and avoid touching their mouths, noses or eyes.
- Teach your children to cover coughs and sneezes with tissues or the inside of an elbow. Cough or sneeze into sleeves – not hands!
- Help children learn these healthy habits by setting a good example yourself.

What school-related information will you post online?

School nurses will use a citywide database to report the number of students experiencing “influenza-like illness” (fever of 100 degrees or higher, with a cough or sore throat) while at school each day. The Health Department’s website will have a daily list of schools reporting 5 or more cases of influenza-like illness on the previous school day. We will also post attendance for every public school, although this is not an accurate measure of influenza activity in a school.

What should I do if my child is sick?

Do not send your child to school if he or she has a fever of 100 degrees or higher, with cough or sore throat. The great majority of children recover from influenza quickly without treatment, but those with chronic underlying health conditions should call a doctor about receiving antiviral treatment. Children at higher risk include those with asthma, diabetes, neurological conditions or weakened immune systems. Any child with signs of severe illness – such as fast breathing or trouble breathing – should receive medical attention immediately.

When can my child return to school if he or she has been out with influenza?

Students kept home with flu-like symptoms should stay out of school until their symptoms are improving and their temperature is normal for at least 24 hours. They will not need a doctor’s note to return to school. Children sent home from school because of fever with cough or sore throat will not be allowed to return to school until at least one full day has passed since they were dismissed.

Should I keep my healthy child home from school to prevent infection?

Healthy children do not need to miss school, but those who develop fever with cough or sore throat should be kept home until 24 hours after the fever clears.

For additional information, call 311 or visit www.nyc.gov/flu.

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