



Halton District School Board

Wayne Joudrie, *Director of Education*

Bruce Jones, *Chair of the Board*

September 16, 2009

H1N1 Q & A for School Staff, Volunteers, Parents, Students

The pandemic H1N1 2009 influenza virus (H1N1) has rapidly spread across the world. In Ontario, the majority of confirmed cases of the pandemic strain have been reported in healthy young adults and most cases have been mild. People between 5 and 24 years of age comprise a larger proportion of cases compared to other age groups. Younger children are most at risk of becoming infected.

Q. What are the symptoms of H1N1 and other influenza-like illnesses (ILI)?

Symptoms include fever AND any of the following

- Cough
- General unwell feeling
- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Joint pain
- Vomiting and diarrhea (more common in children than adults)

Q. How is the Board responding to H1N1?

The Board is working in close cooperation and has regular communication with Halton Region Health Department. The Board is ready and able to take whatever advice or action the Health Department recommends. The Halton District School Board has a comprehensive Pandemic Response Plan that guides our actions. This Plan and regular H1N1 updates are available on the website at <http://www.hdsb.ca>, homepage under the *Noteworthy* heading.

Q. Will Halton Public Health Department contact us if someone in our school has tested positive for H1N1?

Halton Region Health Department is no longer reporting individual confirmed cases to schools. The number of confirmed cases in Halton is reported weekly at www.halton.ca.

Q. What action is to be taken in schools? What if influenza-like illness is occurring in the school?

Principals will:

- Continue to stress key prevention activities, e.g. hand washing with soap and water, cough/sneeze etiquette and staying home when ill
- Monitor the overall health of students and staff
- Ensure that students exhibiting influenza-like illness (ILI) symptoms are separated from the rest of the school population until they can be picked up by parents or caregivers
- Ensure that staff and student absenteeism is reported through the public health web portal on a daily basis beginning Monday, September 28, 2009.
- Liaise with school custodial staff regarding environmental cleaning procedures with particular attention to touch surfaces, e.g. door knobs, handrails, etc. using neutral disinfectants in addition to routine custodial cleaning methods.

Q. We have staff members, parents and volunteers who are pregnant or have an underlying health condition or are immuno-suppressed. What advice should be given?

Pregnant women in school setting and individuals with pre-existing health condition are not at an increased risk of contracting the influenza-like illness (ILI). However, they appear to be at an increased risk of secondary complications and should ensure that they practice proper hand hygiene and contact their health care provider as soon as possible if they become ill with symptoms. For women who are pregnant, more information is available in the Public Health Agency of Canada Information bulletin "Pregnancy and the H1N1 Flu Virus" found on their website at <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/>.

Q. Are we recommending exclusion of pregnant women from schools?

Ontario is not recommending exclusion of pregnant teachers from schools or other workplaces during the flu season.

It is important to remember that influenza is a community-acquired infection, so avoiding work settings, like schools, will not reduce the risk of exposure. Additionally, this is a relatively mild disease in the vast majority of cases (our provincial hospitalization surveillance database contains 12 or 13 H1N1-related hospitalizations in pregnant women in Ontario - no deaths). Finally, although pregnant women are at somewhat higher risk of complications from influenza every season (all types, including, it appears, H1N1, particularly in the third trimester), the risk is not "high".

Personal protection through frequent hand washing is critical and receipt of both vaccines, when available, also recommended. Our MOHLTC public education campaign is also meant to reduce the risk to others through aggressive messaging which advises people to stay home when sick. We also are working closely with the Ministry of Education to reduce the risks of outbreaks in school settings through environmental, administrative and individual interventions. Guidelines which address these three issues have been developed in consultation with the Ministry of Education and are being implemented by school boards in collaboration with local Medical Officers of Health.

Finally, pregnant women and people with underlying health conditions should speak to their physician to determine if they should be treated if/when they get the flu. The antiviral medication Tamiflu must be administered within 48 hours of onset of symptoms to be effective. (information provided by Dr. Arlene King, Chief Medical Officer of Health, Ontario, Sept. 15/09)

Q. Should masks be worn in school?

The Public Health Agency of Canada does not recommend the wearing of masks in school settings to protect against contracting H1N1. Evidence shows that this is not effective in preventing transmission of influenza in the general public. Therefore, staff and students will not wear masks in school.

Q. Are alcohol-based hand rubs (ABHR) allowed in schools?

Since staff, visitors, volunteers and students are able to wash their hands with soap and water in our schools and workplaces, currently we are not providing alcohol-based hand rubs (ABHR) in schools. Students may bring a travel-size container of ABHR to school on a daily basis for their personal use only. We recommend that if an ABHR product is used, it be unscented to avoid environmental sensitivities.

Q. Will the seasonal flu vaccine protect me against H1N1?

This fall and winter, there will be two types of flu viruses circulating – a seasonal flu virus and the new H1N1 virus. A seasonal flu vaccination will not protect you against the H1N1 virus. The seasonal flu vaccine will be available as usual this fall. The H1N1 vaccine will be available later in the fall or early winter.

Q. What steps can we take in order to help reduce the spread of seasonal or H1N1 flu viruses or ILI (influenza-like illness) in schools?

At this time the most important factors in reducing the spread of seasonal or H1N1 flu viruses or ILI in schools are:

- Early identification of ill students, staff and volunteers showing symptoms of ILI
- Excluding anyone ill with ILI symptoms from school
- Using proven infection control measures such as
 - Wash your hands frequently with soap and water especially after coughing or sneezing, or use an alcohol-based hand rub containing 60-90% alcohol
 - Sneeze or cough into your sleeve or disposable tissues. Dispose of tissues immediately.
 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth unless you washed your hands immediately before
 - Clean shared surfaces frequently
 - Stay at home if ill with ILI
 - Find out about flu vaccination for both seasonal and H1N1 flu.

Q. In light of new WHO guidelines, are you planning to close schools?

The World Health Organization must consider the broadest possible range of options to address the impact of H1N1, in light of the wide range of health systems and infrastructure support that exists among Member States.

Ontario is not recommending that schools be closed this fall.

To date, H1N1 has resulted in a mild disease, from a public health perspective.

Any proposed public health impact of school closures will be partially or completely negated if measures to limit contact among students outside of the school setting are not implemented. If students continue to congregate in other settings, they will continue to spread the virus. There also are economic and social costs related to school closures which must be considered. School closures can result in an additional 15 percent increase in workplace absenteeism, including in health care settings. Also, the social costs, must be considered.

On balance, in Ontario, any proposed public health benefits of school closures are outweighed by the risks of significant socioeconomic, including health system, disruption. (information provided by Dr. Arlene King, Chief Medical Officer of Health, Ontario, Sept. 15/09)

Q. Where can I get more detailed information?

The Board website (<http://www.hdsb.ca>) has a direct link to the Halton Region Health Department website. This site contains the most current information. As well, the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care has produced a brochure called *This year it's a different flu season*. This brochure will be delivered to every household in Ontario by Canada Post during the week of September 14.

Additional information sources:

<http://www.hdsb.ca> Halton District School Board website with links to the Halton Region Health Department website or go directly to <http://www.halton.ca/health/>

http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/updates/archives/hu_09/swine_flu.html Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care

<http://www.oahpp.ca> Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion

www.ontario.ca/flu information about seasonal flu, pH1N1 and pandemic preparedness

1-866-797-0000 or TTY: 1-866-797-0007 Telehealth Ontario

<http://www.ontario.ca/healthcareconnect> Health Care Connect program for those who do not have a health care provider

<http://www.fightflu.ca> Public Health Agency of Canada

http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerte/swine-porcine/faq_rg_swine-eng.php Public Health Agency of Canada

<http://www.who.int/en/> World Health Organization