



**North Yorkshire and the Humber
Health Protection Unit**

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Dear Head teacher,

As you may have seen on the news recently the national strategy for dealing with swine flu has now changed from that of trying to contain the spread of the illness to that of mitigation in terms of focussing on the treatment of people who are ill.

It may be that over the coming months and indeed through the coming winter that parents may ring in to say that a pupil has been diagnosed by their GP as having swine flu.

Now that testing for swine flu has decreased most of these cases will remain unconfirmed and it will be very difficult to assess when these cases represent true swine flu and which will herald the start of an actual outbreak within a school.

On the whole though, it should be recognised that in the vast majority of people the illness is mild and not thought to be any more serious than normal seasonal influenza. Should the virus evolve into a more serious illness or the national strategy alter significantly we may write to you again.

When to contact the Health Protection Unit?

It will be important to monitor sickness absence and to inform the HPU at the point at which you believe there may be an increase in staff and/or pupil absenteeism due to a flu like or respiratory illness. The first important action will be to identify high risk groups.

Important people to identify in advance

Although the illness is mild and nothing to worry about for the majority of people it is recognised that anyone with a chronic underlying health condition especially those who may have a suppressed immune system (either due to specific immunodeficiency illness or as a result of cancer treatment) are at a higher risk of developing complications and should be prioritised for treatment. Under certain circumstances it may also be discussed with the school and parents about whether exclusion of an individual child for their own safety is necessary and whether they should receive antiviral medication as a prophylactic measure to try and prevent illness.

High risk groups:

- people with suppressed immune systems (whether caused by disease or treatment),
- people with chronic heart disease
- people with chronic kidney disease
- people with chronic liver disease
- people with chronic neurological disease
- people with chronic lung disease including people who have had drug treatment for their asthma within the past three years
- people with diabetes
- pregnant women
- people aged 65 years and older
- children under five years old

Pregnant members of staff

Pregnancy is considered in the list of high risk groups although in the majority of cases the illness has proven no more different to normal seasonal flu and should not be of undue concern to the majority of pregnant staff members in the event of an outbreak. Again they should perhaps have a lower threshold for seeking medical advice in the event of becoming unwell.

Further information is available on the HPA website www.hpa.org.uk

Informing parents

It may not be possible or desirable to inform parents every time an individual child may be thought to have swine flu. In the event of increased absenteeism as described above and following discussions with the HPU, however, it may then be valuable to raise parental awareness and enforce exclusion of ill children. Adopting the former approach may lead to 'message fatigue' and a lack of response at the time it may be most beneficial.

Infection control and exclusion

In general terms the infectivity of the illness can be equated to the degree of symptoms (in particular coughing and sneezing) and children and staff should be excluded only when they are unwell and have symptoms of flu. There is never any reason to exclude a well child or member of staff even if a member of their close family is unwell.

Suspension of normal activities and school closure

Schools should continue with business as usual unless advised otherwise. It is not envisaged at this point that there will be a strong need to advise schools to close. Likewise except in extremis it will not be necessary to cancel events or trips providing all those attending are well.

Peripatetic teachers

A well teacher does not represent a risk of transmission even if another school they have attended has declared an outbreak. Any teacher with flu like symptoms should be asked to stay at home until well again.

For a full list of infection control advice please refer to the previously distributed "Guidance on Infection Prevention and Communicable Diseases in Schools and Colleges".

General advice for the public

Members of the public who believe they may have swine flu, should first go online and check their symptoms on www.nhs.uk, call NHS Direct (0845 46 47) or call the Swine Flu information line on 0800 1 513 513. If they are still concerned, they should call their GP, who can provide a diagnosis over the phone.

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