

H1N1 Influenza & Schools

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

What is H1N1 influenza?

The H1N1 flu virus is a new strain of influenza that causes the same symptoms as seasonal flu.

What are the signs and symptoms of H1N1 influenza?

The sign and symptoms of H1N1 flu are similar to seasonal flu and include respiratory symptoms with fever, cough, sore throat, muscle aches, joint pain, or weakness. In children under 5, gastrointestinal symptoms may also be present and fever may not be prominent.

How does H1N1 influenza spread?

Spread of the H1N1 virus is thought to be happening in the same way that seasonal flu spreads. Flu viruses are spread mainly from person to person through coughing or sneezing. Sometimes people may become infected by touching objects or surfaces that have been contaminated with the flu virus and then touching their mouth or nose.

Why are people concerned about this particular virus?

H1N1 is a new influenza virus, which means that we cannot be certain about how it will behave.

There is also concern because H1N1 is infecting children and young adults at a greater rate than the seasonal flu that occurs every year. A very small number of the young and healthy who become infected get very ill quite rapidly.

Why should we be concerned about the spread of H1N1 in schools?

Students can get sick with influenza and schools may act as a point of spread since students are in close contact and can easily spread the virus to other students and family members. In Ontario, people between 5 and 24 years of age comprise a larger proportion of cases compared to other age groups.

Which students, staff, and volunteers are at higher risk for complications from H1N1?

Everyone is at risk of getting H1N1 (even healthy people) and serious problems from H1N1 can happen at any age. However, pregnant women and people of any age with chronic medical conditions (such as pulmonary disease, asthma, diabetes, neuromuscular disorders, or heart disease) are more likely to have complications from H1N1.

What can students, staff, and volunteers do to stay healthy?

- Wash your hands with soap and warm running water for at least 15 seconds or, if water is not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Note that alcohol-based sanitizer must contain at least 60% alcohol to be effective and that only a small volume is necessary for each application (1 to 2 ml).
- Cough and sneeze into a tissue or, if a tissue is not available, your sleeve - and not into your hands. Dispose of tissues immediately and follow-up with hand washing, using soap and water, or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Keep commonly touched surfaces and items clean and disinfected.
- Don't share personal items such as eating utensils or drinks.

What should students, staff and volunteers do if they become ill?

Students, staff, and volunteers who become ill should be encouraged to stay home until they are feeling well and are able to fully participate in all normal day-to-day activities.

Call your health care provider, local public health unit, or Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000 if you experience flu symptoms and you:

- are pregnant;
- have heart or lung disease;
- have chronic health problems that require regular medical attention;
- are elderly or frail;
- have an illness or are receiving treatments – for example, for diabetes, cancer, or HIV/AIDS – that might affect your immune system; or,
- you think you may need medical attention.