

**Ministry of Health
and Long-Term Care**

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October 29, 2009

MEMORANDUM

FROM: Dr. Arlene King, Chief Medical Officer of Health, Province of Ontario
Council of Ontario Medical Officers of Health

TO: Directors of Education
Supervisory Officers and Secretary-Treasurers of School Authorities
Director of the Provincial Schools Branch

RE: Consistent practice for the prevention and management of Pandemic H1N1 2009 (pH1N1) in the elementary and secondary school setting

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide additional clarity to Ontario's education sector on the public health guidance for the prevention and management of pH1N1 in elementary and secondary schools. pH1N1 has shown to be mild in the majority of cases, but because influenza is a serious illness it is very important to ensure that schools and school boards across the province are aware of and adhere to public health recommendations to ensure staff, students and volunteers are kept healthy and safe and to provide information that parents, community members and leaders require to make informed decisions.

As the Chief Medical Officer of Health and as local Medical Officers of Health in Ontario's 36 public health units, an evidence-based and consistent approach to preventing and managing influenza in the school setting is important. To this end, the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) issued guidelines on August 28th that outlines key strategies that should be put in place in the educational setting. These guidelines were developed based on current evidence and have been endorsed by us all.

Measures that all elementary and secondary schools should be taking include the following:

Immunization

- Our best defence against the pH1N1 virus is to receive vaccine against it.
- Pregnant women should get immunized with the pH1N1 vaccine as soon as it is available, especially those with pre-existing medical conditions and those in the second half of pregnancy (over 20 weeks).
- All persons under 65 years of age with pre-existing medical conditions should get immunized with the pH1N1 vaccine as soon as it is available.
- We encourage all students, staff and volunteers to be immunized with the pH1N1 vaccine. They should be encouraged to contact their local public health unit to determine availability.

Infection prevention and control

- Hand hygiene is an important measure for preventing the spread of infections and this should be practiced by everyone in the school setting.
- Hand washing facilities should be checked to ensure that hand washing supplies are available and accessible for use. If hand washing facilities are not available, alcohol-based hand rub should be placed in locations under adult supervision.
- Respiratory etiquette may also play an important role in reducing the spread of influenza. Students, staff and volunteers should practice proper etiquette by coughing and sneezing into a sleeve, disposing of tissues and performing hand hygiene after disposing of tissues. The touching of eyes, mouth and nose should be avoided.
- Students should be encouraged to use their own pens, pencils, tissues, etc. to reduce the need to share supplies.
- Students, staff and volunteers who become ill should be advised to stay home until they no longer have fever and are well.

Screening

- Active screening of students, staff, volunteers and visitors for influenza-like illness (ILI) is not recommended.
- Early recognition and separation of students, staff and volunteers with ILI can reduce the risk of transmission to others. Staff, parents and students should be aware of the symptoms of influenza and the importance of reporting ILI symptoms to their school.

Environmental Cleaning

- The influenza virus can survive 8 to 48 hours on different surfaces. Frequent cleaning of surfaces and high touch items can help reduce the spread of the virus. Regular cleaning with commercially available cleaning products is sufficient to kill the influenza virus.

Managing ILI in Students, Staff and Volunteers

- Parents should be advised to keep children with ILI symptoms at home.
- Schools should have protocols in place to notify parents/guardians/designated alternates if their child becomes ill with ILI while at school.
- Students who become ill while at school should be separated from other children. Supervising staff should give ill students tissues to cover their mouth and nose while coughing and sneezing and try to keep a distance of at least two metres away and practice frequent hand hygiene.
- Ill staff and volunteers should not come to work. Staff/volunteers that develop symptoms of ILI while at work should leave the school as soon as possible and return when they no longer have fever and are well. The presence of a cough in the absence of other symptoms is not sufficient to keep someone away from school or work.

School Closures

- School closures are not recommended at present
- If school closures are being contemplated within the school or school board, contact must be made with the local public health unit.

Pregnant Women

- Pregnant women are at no greater risk of acquiring pH1N1 than non-pregnant women and as such exclusion from work is not being recommended
- Some pregnant women may be at higher risk of developing complications from influenza. It is important for them to practice proper infection prevention and control practices and consult their healthcare provider immediately if they develop symptoms of illness.

- Pregnant women should get immunized with the pH1N1 vaccine, especially those in the second half of pregnancy.

Communication

- Information should be sent to staff, students, volunteers and parents advising them of the symptoms to be watchful for, proper infection control and prevention practices and what to do if they or their child becomes sick.

Consultation with Public Health

- As the Chief Medical Officer of Health and local Medical Officers of Health, we can offer guidance on surveillance activities, infection prevention and control practices, up to date information on the pH1N1 virus and communication products for parents, staff and students. Please contact us for further questions or advice.

Detailed information can be found in *Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 in Elementary and Secondary Schools* available on-line at http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/ccom/flu/h1n1/pro/docs/school_guidelines_20090828.pdf

Collectively, our shared commitment is to protect and promote the health of Ontarians including those in our schools. We encourage consistent practice across the education sector in managing pH1N1 in accordance with provincial guidelines, and will work with you to keep our schools healthy and safe.

Sincerely,

Original signed by

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Chief Medical Officer of Health

Original signed by

Dr. Paul Roumeliotis, MD CM, MPH, FRCP(C)
Council of Ontario Medical Officers of Health

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