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## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

May 5, 2009

Ministry of Education

### **FOR PARENTS: H1N1 INFLUENZA A (HUMAN SWINE FLU)**

#### **Q1: What is the H1N1 flu virus and how does it spread?**

- The H1N1 (swine flu) virus is a respiratory illness that occurs in pigs. Changes to the virus have allowed the current strain to infect humans. Usually, H1N1 flu cases are not common in Canada with only one case per year being reported over the past few years.
- The symptoms of the H1N1 flu virus are similar to seasonal influenza and include high fever, cough, headache, general aches, fatigue, eye pain, shortness of breath and lack of appetite. Some people with the H1N1 flu have also reported a runny nose, sore throat, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.
- The H1N1 flu virus, like other influenza viruses, spreads mainly through the coughing or sneezing of a sick person. It may also be spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with the virus and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.

#### **Q2: Will schools be closed to limit the spread of the H1N1 virus?**

- Week-long school closures will be considered to reduce the spread of infection in the school population, or for other public interest reasons in circumstances where:
  - A student or staff member has tested positive for H1N1 influenza A; and,
  - It is determined the student or staff member was present at school when infectious; and,
  - The full incubation period for the H1N1 influenza A virus (seven days) has not passed since the confirmed lab test.
  - A school may also be closed if the Provincial Health Officer decides there are other circumstances to warrant it.

#### **Q3: Who decides if schools get closed?**

- If a school meets the criteria for closure, the superintendent (or equivalent authority in the independent system) will immediately communicate the decision to the Ministry of Education and the principal of the affected school.
- The Provincial Health Officer also has the power to close a school should circumstances warrant it.

#### **Q4: How will I hear if my child's school is closed?**

- In the event of a school closure, the school principal and the district will inform school staff, students, parents, the public and members of the media by letters and other means.
- School districts will provide regular updates to ensure that parents of children in affected schools get as much information as possible.

#### **Q5: What makes this flu so different from normal seasonal flu that makes closing a school necessary?**

- Seasonal influenza outbreaks occur every year and we try to prevent the virus with seasonal vaccines. This particular strain of influenza is new and warrants additional precautions.

**Q6: If my child's school is closed, should I keep my child from interacting with other children during the closure week?**

- Sick children should stay home to help provide a safe, healthy environment for all our students. It is also best if these children do not participate in after school activities and that they stay away from crowded public places like shopping malls and movie theatres until they are symptom-free or their school re-opens.
- Even if a child is not experiencing flu-like symptoms, as a preventative measure, parents are encouraged to consider limiting their child's exposure to large groups during the week the school is closed.

**Q7: What can I do to help keep my child safe?**

- It's important all parents review with their children the standard hygiene and prevention measures.
- Practical measures that are helpful to reduce infection:
  - Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you sneeze; throw the tissue in the trash after you use it. Try to cough into your sleeve.
  - Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleansers are also effective.
  - Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
  - If you get sick, stay home and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them.
  - Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread more easily with contact to these areas.
- The Provincial Health Officer, working with the Regional Health Officers, will continue to closely monitor the situation and to provide the latest, most accurate, information to parents, students, and school districts.

**Q8: If the school is closed, will the time have to be made up later in the year?**

- No. When a board of education closes a school temporarily because of health concerns, the School Calendar Regulation counts those hours as if they were instructional time – so, students do not need to make up the time.

**Q9: How would a school closure affect exams?**

- The ministry will work with schools or districts on a case-by-case basis, if closures affect exams. If exams are missed, students may have the option to write at the next regular exam session, or alternative exam sessions may be offered.

**Q10: I've seen reports on T.V. and in the newspaper and am very worried, how do I know what to believe?**

- The Provincial Health Officer, in working with the Regional Health Officers, will continue to closely monitor the situation and to provide the latest, most accurate, information to parents, students, and School Districts.
- At this point, all cases in British Columbia have been very similar to seasonal influenza, and all patients are either recovering or have already recovered.

- Provincial health officials are encouraging students, parents and schools to continue taking practical steps to prevent the spread of illness.

**Q11: What is the difference between an “infection” and the “incubation period”?**

- People usually show symptoms within three days but some may not begin to show symptoms until seven days after picking up the virus.
- People are infectious typically from the day before they begin to have symptoms until seven days after symptoms begin.

**Q12: Where can I get more information?**

- Get the latest facts at [www.gov.bc.ca/swineflu](http://www.gov.bc.ca/swineflu).
- If you are feeling ill or have questions or concerns, you can call HealthLink BC at 8-1-1, 24 hours a day/seven days a week.
- You can also get more information by visiting [www.facebook.com/h1n1informationbc](https://www.facebook.com/h1n1informationbc), or by following H1N1BC on Twitter.