

## *About the Flu.....*

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Welcome back to school—and welcome back to worries about the flu, particularly the H1N1 variety. There has been much publicity in the last several weeks about this flu, and many students and parents are worried about getting sick.

Perhaps the most comforting way to approach this subject is to review what is known about this virus so far:

1. H1N1 is generally causing very mild upper respiratory symptoms, such as fever, sore throat, cough and other cold symptoms. Persons having this illness report feeling ill for 3-4 days, and then they quickly recover.
2. Although all ages may be susceptible to H1N1, there appears to be more incidence of flu in children, adolescents and in young adults, than has usually been seen with previous flu outbreaks.
3. The CDC has reported flu incidence all summer, also an unusual feature of this particular strain of illness.
4. Persons with H1N1 usually recover quickly, without serious complications, although there are certain risk groups who may—in extremely small numbers—experience more severe symptoms. For this reason, health care workers, persons with chronic or debilitating illness, persons with impaired immune systems and pregnant women are all being targeted for early vaccination, once the vaccine becomes available.

So why do we worry so much about the spread of H1N1 in schools? As in past years, students with respiratory infections are more likely to transmit the virus when they are in close contact with other students. Though some people blame contact with door knobs, toilets, pencils, and other hard surfaces for getting sick, the truth is that *hand to face* contact is the usual route of exposure, as the virus enters the body through membranes of the eyes, mouth and nose. One study of college students at the University of California, Berkeley observed that students touched their faces—lip scratch, eye rub, nose touch/pick—at least 47 times during a 3 hour period, about once every 4 minutes.

So what's a parent to do? Here are some easy steps to reduce your child's risk of infection:

1. **Handwashing:** Don't just tell your kids to wash their hands; demonstrate the procedure to them, so that they can model your behavior. Warm running water, soap (antibacterial soap is not necessary), hand friction x 30 seconds, thorough rinsing, shutting off the faucet with a paper towel, and thorough hand drying are the keys to clean hands.

2. **When to hand wash?** Generally it is wise to wash hands at transition points throughout the day; in the morning, after breakfast and brushing teeth, after blowing nose or touching the face, before and after using the bathroom, and before and after eating.
3. **How about alcohol-based hand sanitizers?** Studies have shown that when access is limited, either by location or by habit, to soap and water hand-washing, hand sanitizers are very effective in decreasing the spread of illness.
4. **Keep hands away from face:** this seems like a tall order, but sometimes just reminding children that these habits may make them sick is enough to get them to minimize hand to face contact; if not, at least they may remember to wash their hands after touching their face.
5. **Go home** when you are sick: this is a great time to teach your child the value of work-life balance by making sure that all members of the family, including parents, stay home when they are sick with a respiratory infection and fever. In school, we urge you to make haste in coming to pick-up your child when they have symptoms of illness. Children with flu-like symptoms are kept separated from other students while they await pick up, so they will be very glad to see you when you come to get them.
6. **Stay home:** Keeping your child/family member/self home until symptoms subside is the most effective means for minimizing the spread of illness; children should not return to school until they have been free of fever **WITHOUT** fever reduction and cold medications for at least 24 hours.
7. **Get vaccinated;** the seasonal flu vaccine is available in pharmacies, drug stores and in doctors' offices now; the H1N1 vaccine will be available for high risk groups by mid-October, and for everyone by the end of October.

Please feel free to contact the school health room aide or the school public health nurse for any questions you may have about these health tips.