



*The Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
Executive Office of Health and Human Services  
Department of Public Health*

## **Information for Parents about Flu in Schools**

**Updated November 6, 2009**

### **Is H1N1 influenza (swine flu) still a concern in Massachusetts?**

Yes. After subsiding somewhat during the summer of 2009, H1N1 flu is spreading again in Massachusetts. H1N1 influenza activity is “widespread” in Massachusetts as of early November 2009, meaning that there have been cases of H1N1 influenza in every region of the state.

### **It seems like H1N1 influenza has been pretty mild. Should I be worried about it?**

Most people who had H1N1 flu during the spring of 2009 (and since then) had mild illness and did not need medical care. However, some people were hospitalized and some have died. Most of the people who became very sick were pregnant or had health problems like diabetes, asthma, heart disease, kidney disease, or suppressed immune systems. Flu can be very serious, especially for young children (under the age of five, and especially under two years of age) and in children with chronic health conditions that make them more susceptible to flu. Also, young people appear more likely to get sick from H1N1 flu than older adults.

### **Will the H1N1 flu virus be stronger than it was last spring and make people sicker?**

We don't know whether it will be stronger than in the spring, or stronger than seasonal influenza. As of early November, 2009, H1N1 does not appear to have gotten stronger, and it causes mild illness in most people who get it. We expect that more people will get sick with the H1N1 virus because it's a new virus, and most people have no immunity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other health organizations will continue to monitor the virus to see if it changes.

### **What can I do to keep my child from getting sick?**

It is important to teach your children how to reduce their risk of getting the flu and how to protect others from becoming infected. *If we all practice good hygiene, we can limit the spread of flu in our schools.*

- **Get your child both the H1N1 and seasonal flu shots.** Vaccination is the best way to keep your child from getting the flu.
- **Teach your children to wash their hands often.** Washing with soap and hot water for at least 20 seconds is ideal (about as long as it takes to sing the “Happy Birthday” song twice).
- **Teach your children to use hand sanitizer.** Gels, rubs, and hand wipes all work well, as long as they contain at least 60% alcohol. Watch small children using gels so they don't swallow it.

- **Teach your children to cough or sneeze into their elbow—not their hands!** Cover coughs and sneezes with tissues or by coughing into the inside of their elbow. They should wash their hands after blowing their nose or coughing into a tissue.
- **Teach your children to avoid touching their nose, mouth or eyes.** They should keep their hands away from their face.

### **Should my child get the seasonal flu vaccine?**

All children age 6 months through 18 years should get the seasonal flu vaccine (the shot or the nasal spray) every year. You should get your children vaccinated as soon the flu vaccine becomes available. You can get it from your doctor or nurse, and from some pharmacies. Some communities will also provide flu vaccine at schools and local boards of health.

### **Should my child get the H1N1 flu vaccine?**

All children age six months through 18 years should get the H1N1 flu vaccine (the shot or the nasal spray). Most young children (under 10) will need two doses of vaccine, spaced approximately one month apart. Children age 10 and older will need one dose of vaccine.

In addition, the H1N1 flu shot is recommended for everyone else, especially:

- pregnant women
- household contacts and caregivers of infants less than 6 months of age
- people 19 to 25 years, and adults to age 64 who have certain health problems like heart disease, asthma, diabetes, weakened immune systems, and certain muscle or nerve conditions that can lead to breathing or swallowing problems.
- healthcare providers and emergency medical services staff

Please note that the groups listed above may change based on vaccine availability.

### **Can the seasonal flu vaccine and the H1N1 flu vaccine be given at the same time?**

For some types of vaccine this is possible (for example, H1N1 and seasonal flu vaccine given by a shot). For other types of vaccine it is not possible (for example, H1N1 and seasonal flu vaccine given by the nasal spray). Your healthcare provider will help you decide what is best for your child.

### **Are seasonal and H1N1 vaccines safe?**

Yes, seasonal and H1N1 vaccines are among the safest medications that are administered to people, including prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications. Like any vaccine or medication, seasonal and H1N1 vaccines should be administered by trained health professionals who will determine which vaccine is best suited to each patient. A patient with an allergy to eggs, for example, should avoid vaccines derived from eggs in order to avoid an allergic reaction to the vaccine. Most people who get seasonal or H1N1 flu vaccine do not experience any side effects, and those that do experience side effects have mild side effects, like soreness at the site of the flu shot, or a runny nose after having the nasal spray. Serious side effects are extremely rare.

H1N1 vaccine is being made exactly the same way seasonal flu vaccine is made every year, and with the same testing process required before distribution. It is as safe as seasonal influenza vaccine. Like any vaccine or medication, seasonal and H1N1 vaccines should be administered by trained health professionals who will determine which vaccine is best suited to each patient.

A patient with an allergy to eggs, for example, should avoid vaccines derived from eggs in order to avoid an allergic reaction to the vaccine.

Vaccines are tested in people before they are approved for wider use. Vaccines are only approved for wider use if the testing (called a “clinical trial”) shows that the vaccines are safe to use. Once vaccines are approved and are being used throughout the country, any problem following vaccination should be reported by healthcare providers to a national reporting system. This reporting of “adverse events” allows the safety of the vaccine to be continuously monitored.

The bottom line regarding vaccine safety: Flu is a serious respiratory disease. Keeping safe from the flu by getting the vaccine greatly outweighs the very small risk of side effects from both seasonal and H1N1 vaccines.

**If I got sick last spring with flu symptoms, am I protected from getting it again this fall?**

Unless you had a specific laboratory test called RT-PCR that confirmed you had H1N1 influenza, it’s possible that you had something other than H1N1. RT-PCR is different from rapid flu tests that doctors can do in their offices. Most people with flu-like illness are not tested using RT-PCR. Therefore, most people who had flu-like illness during the spring, summer or early fall should get vaccinated if your doctor recommends it.

If you had confirmed H1N1 influenza you should have some protection (immunity) against H1N1 flu, although we don’t know how much. Getting vaccinated again is not harmful, and may provide additional protection.

**If there is H1N1 flu in my community, is it safe for my child to go to school?**

At this time, state and local public health officials recommend that students can--and should--continue to go to school, as long as they are not sick and do not have flu symptoms. Flu-like symptoms include: fever (over 100.4 degrees F), with cough and/or sore throat. Additional symptoms of H1N1 flu include: runny nose, stuffy nose, headache, body aches, feeling very tired, and sometimes vomiting or diarrhea.

**Is it safe (as far as flu is concerned) for my child to participate in sports?**

Just like going to school, students should continue to play sports as long as they are not sick and do not have flu symptoms. While playing sports and engaging in other recreational activities, students should avoid such practices as sharing water bottles, sharing drinks, or sharing mouthpieces, which could result in transmission of flu and other illnesses.

**What should I do if my child is sick?**

Flu spreads easily from person to person. If you think your child is getting the flu:

- Keep your child home. It is very important that your child does not go to school or other places where they could spread the flu virus to other people, such as group childcare, after school programs, the mall, or sporting events.
- Call your doctor’s office and let them know your child’s symptoms and history. Your doctor will advise you whether you should come to the office. It is best to call ahead so that you help prevent spreading illness to others.
- Call your child’s school to notify them that they are sick, and tell the school nurse if your child has flu-like symptoms.
- Keep your school nurse updated on your child’s medical condition.

- Do not give your child or teenager (18 years of age or younger) aspirin or aspirin-containing products due to the rare but serious illness called Reye syndrome.

- **All individuals with flu-like symptoms should stay home for at least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever, without using fever-reducing medicines.** These medicines include Motrin or Advil (ibuprofen), Tylenol (acetaminophen) or a store brand. Keeping children with a fever at home will keep them from getting other people sick. For most people, this will be about 4 days. See the ‘Flu Symptom Checklist for Families and Schools’ on page 5 for more information.

- Schools are **not** allowed to accept a doctor’s note recommending a child with flu-like symptoms return to school before the time period described above.

**Will my child’s school be closed if there is a case of flu?**

School and public health officials will be focused on preventing the spread of the flu in schools so that schools can stay open. These officials will be closely following the situation and will inform you in the unlikely event that your child’s school is closed. However, it is important to plan ahead. Talk to your family now to decide who would care for your child if their school is closed. If school is closed, it is important that students not gather together at another location, but rather stay home to avoid spreading the flu virus to other people.

**What precautions are being taken at schools?**

- Careful hand washing is very important in preventing the spread of disease, including the flu. School nurses and teachers have been and will continue to remind and teach students about hand washing and covering coughs and sneezes.
- All school nurses, food services staff, principals and school faculty staff are working to prevent flu in a number of ways.
- School nurses will keep track of students sick with flu-like symptoms, so that potential outbreaks can be identified quickly.
- School nurses are working closely with local and state public health authorities as questions arise.

**Where can I get more information?**

- **Mass 2-1-1 provides flu information for the general public:** call **211** or 1-877-211-MASS (6277). Interpreter services available in many languages.
- Call your doctor, nurse or clinic, or your local board of health
- Call the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Immunization Program at: (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850
- Massachusetts Department of Public Health website at [mass.gov/flu](http://mass.gov/flu)
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at: [www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu)

For flu clinic information, visit the MassPRO Public Flu Clinic Finder website at: <http://flu.masspro.org/>

**Thank you for your help and cooperation in keeping our children and our schools healthy.**

# Flu Symptom Checklist for Families and Schools

Updated November 6, 2009

The main symptoms of influenza (flu) include **fever and cough and/or sore throat**. Some people also have a runny nose, body aches, headache, chills and feel tired. Some people also have diarrhea and vomiting. The most important thing that you can do to keep flu from spreading in the community is to keep your sick child at home when they are sick.

SHOULD I KEEP MY CHILD HOME?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Has your child had a fever of 100.4 degrees or more in the past 24 hours?
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Does your child have a cough <b>OR</b> sore throat?
<b>If you answered <u>YES</u> to <u>both questions</u> above, keep your child home.</b>	
<u>Your child has an influenza-like illness.</u>	
CAN MY CHILD RETURN TO SCHOOL?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Has your child had a fever of 100.4 degrees or more in the past 24 hours?
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Has your child had acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Motrin or Advil) in the past 24 hours?
<b>If you answered <u>NO</u> to <u>both questions</u> above, your child can return to school.</b>	
<b>If you answered <u>YES</u> to one of the questions above, your child CANNOT return to school.</b> Keep your child home for at least another day to observe for additional symptoms. Then use the checklist questions again to decide whether you should continue to keep your child home.	

## Where can I find more information about influenza?

- 1) Mass 2-1-1 provides flu information for the general public: call 211 or 1-877-211-MASS (6277). Interpreter services available in many languages.
- 2) Go to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health influenza website: [mass.gov/flu](http://mass.gov/flu)
- 3) A "[Fever Fact Sheet](#)" with information on how to take a temperature is also available.