

## **H1N1 Flu Virus**

H1N1 flu is a highly contagious respiratory illness caused by a new virus referred to as H1N1 (or “swine flu”). The World Health Organization has declared that the spread of the virus can be characterized as a “pandemic” and accordingly, federal, provincial and local health authorities are in the process of pandemic preparedness planning. It is expected that the virus will reappear as an even stronger strain in the fall months, which is traditionally the flu season. Vaccines which are currently being tested to combat this VIRUS will be available in the late fall of 2009.

Find more information on the H1N1 virus and its symptoms:

\* Ontario Ministry of Health

**[www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/updates/archives/hu\\_09/swine\\_flu.html](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/updates/archives/hu_09/swine_flu.html)**

\* Public Health Agency of Canada **[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/index-eng.php](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/index-eng.php)**

\* Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS)

**<http://www.ccohs.ca/pandemic/>**

\* Fight Flu **[www.fightflu.ca/index-eng.html](http://www.fightflu.ca/index-eng.html)**

\* World Health Organization (WHO) **<http://www.who.int/en/>**

Because school boards will post frequent updates, check school board and school websites regularly. You can also call Service Ontario INFOline at 1-800-476-9708; TTY at 1-800-387-5559. If you are ill or have health concerns you should contact your physician.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **Q. How long are people infectious?**

Current evidence suggests that infected people may be able to infect others as early as one day before symptoms develop and up to seven or more days after becoming sick. That means you may be able to pass the flu on to someone before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick.

### **Q. How long are people usually sick with this flu?**

Most people recover in seven to 10 days, although as of September 1, 2009 there had been few deaths attributed to it in Canada. The severity of the illness depends on a number of factors including whether the individual has any other underlying health problems.

### **Q. How does it spread?**

It spreads in the same way as seasonal influenza – through droplets contained in sneezes and coughs and by direct contact, such as hand contact.

### **Q. Is there a vaccine for the H1N1 flu virus?**

In August, the federal government announced that it was ordering over 50 million doses of a new H1N1 vaccine, which has not yet been fully tested. Clinical trials were expected to begin in the fall and the federal government has stated that immunization programs are scheduled to begin by November.

The seasonal flu shot will not protect you against the H1N1 flu virus. Speak to your physician about being vaccinated for both illnesses. Stay informed as information is updated frequently through websites such as [www.fightflu.ca](http://www.fightflu.ca), recommended by the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Health and the Long-Term Care website [www.health.gov.on.ca](http://www.health.gov.on.ca). Many school boards have updates on H1N1 information and their response plans on their websites.

**Q. How can I protect myself if there is no proven effective vaccine at this time?**

As with other flu viruses that are mainly spread through person-to-person contact, the most important way to prevent the spread of this flu is through constant infection control at home and at school and work. With or without a vaccine it is always recommended that people diligently avoid contracting and spreading all flu viruses, including H1N1.

- Wash hands frequently, using soap and warm water for 15 to 20 seconds and dry with paper towel or dryer.
- Use an alcohol-based sanitizer (gels or wipes) if there is no soap and warm running water.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and throw out the tissue immediately. If a tissue is not available, cough into upper sleeve.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Keep common surfaces and items clean and disinfected.
- Avoid large crowds of people where viruses can spread easily.
- Stay home if you are sick and until there has been no fever for 24 hours.

**Q. As a teacher, how can I protect myself when I am continuously in contact with groups of children and the public as part of my job?**

Teachers and education workers are in contact with groups of children every day. Many school boards have pandemic or H1N1 response plans that you should review frequently for the latest information on the virus and for specific information about possible cases of the flu at your school.

In addition to being vigilant about hygiene yourself and in your classroom, it is important to teach to your students and reinforce this behaviour, especially regular hand-washing. Some schools supply hand sanitizers and cleansers. Other boards have decided not to supply alcohol-based sanitizers, because it is potentially flammable and can be an irritant for people with environmental sensitivities. Check with the principal in your school about the availability, use and storage of these products and other prevention measures.

If you have concerns about a student possibly having the H1N1 virus, speak to your principal. If your concerns are not addressed, contact your unit president or association representative. Teachers should be cautious to not overreact. Many children will be sick with regular colds and flu over the school year. If a student in your school is diagnosed with H1N1 virus, the school board and public health authority will advise the staff on how to prevent or contain an outbreak.

**Q. Should I wear a mask to protect myself?**

Health officials do not recommend wearing a surgical mask because this has not proven to effectively prevent the transmission of influenza in the general public. Speak to your unit president or your association representative before taking any such steps.

**Q. I am allergic to alcohol-based hand sanitizer and my board is recommending using them, what should I do?**

Inform your principal of your sensitivity or allergy and ask that a plan be put in place to protect yourself from the use of this product. If it continues to be an issue contact your unit president or association representative.

**Q. What if one of my students has been travelling in places where there are high levels of H1N1 flu, what should I do?**

H1N1 is no longer associated only with Mexico or certain countries. It has spread worldwide and many individuals who have contracted the virus have not travelled or had contact with people who have travelled outside the country. If a student has travelled to a country you are concerned about or exhibits flu-like symptoms, discuss your concerns with your unit president or association representative.

**Q. Should I take special precautions if I am pregnant?**

Pregnant women should speak to their physician and unit president immediately. More information is available in the Public Health Agency of Canada Information Bulletin “Pregnancy and the H1N1 Flu Virus” found on its website [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert/swine/pregnancy](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert/swine/pregnancy)

**Q. If I have special health concerns, should I be doing anything differently?**

If you are suffering from a pre-existing health problem such as diabetes, speak to your physician and unit president immediately.

**Q. For personal reasons, I never get a flu shot and do not want to get the H1N1 flu vaccine. Can I refuse the seasonal flu shot or the H1N1 flu vaccine, if my school board requests that staff be vaccinated?**

It is the position of OECTA that any flu shot or vaccine made available to teachers and education workers is voluntary. No OECTA member should be “required” to get a flu shot.

If your school board requires you to take action about which you have concerns, you should contact your unit president.

**Q. Can I refuse to come to work because I am concerned about H1N1 in my school?**

Unless there has been an official school closure by a public health authority, employees are expected to attend school unless they are sick or on an approved leave. It is important to note that the decision to close a school rests with the public health authority and not OECTA.

There could be employment consequences if a teacher refuses to attend work unless the procedure known as a “work refusal” is properly invoked.

Teachers have a right to refuse work that they believe may endanger their health and safety and other workers, under legislation governing them. They can also refuse if the unsafe conditions are caused by the employer not taking “all reasonable precautions” for the protection of the teacher and other workers.

Under Regulation 857 of *The Education Act*, teachers must ensure the life, health, and safety of the students for whom they are responsible are not in imminent danger when exercising a work refusal. At no time should students be left unsupervised.

This work refusal should only be undertaken if there is reasonable concern. The procedures set out in the law must be followed carefully when invoking a work refusal. A teacher who refuses to work must always remain at the workplace in a safe location.

If you believe that specific conditions at your school endanger “life, health, and safety,” contact your OECTA unit president or call OECTA Provincial Office 1-800-268-7230. Find contact information for your unit at **[www.oecta.on.ca/units/unitsindex.htm](http://www.oecta.on.ca/units/unitsindex.htm)**