

Swine flu: Information for parents with school-age children

Influenza (flu) is a familiar infection in the UK, especially in the winter months. The illness is caused by a virus that attacks the respiratory system and can range from mild to severe.

Some groups of people – **young children** – are generally more susceptible to it and other groups such as older people and those with certain health conditions tend to have more of the complications associated with flu.

Pandemic flu, like the current swine flu outbreak, is different from ordinary flu as it occurs when a new flu virus emerges into the human population and spreads readily and rapidly from person to person worldwide because few people are immune to it. A vaccine for a new flu takes time to develop.

Patients with swine flu typically have a fever (over 38°C / 100.4°F) and two or more of the following symptoms:

- unusual tiredness,
- headache,
- runny nose,
- sore throat,
- shortness of breath or cough,
- loss of appetite,
- aching muscles,
- diarrhoea or vomiting.

Children aged 6 months or less can also sometimes have tummy aches, diarrhoea and vomiting. In very young children, tiredness, poor feeding and difficulty in breathing can also be early signs of flu.

There is still uncertainty about how this virus behaves and its effects on health and it is currently considered that the **incubation period** (the time from being exposed to the virus to showing symptoms) is from one to five days: for most people, it will be 2-3 days.

The **infectious period** (how long you are infectious to others) is still not clear but it is believed that people are most infectious soon after they develop symptoms, and remain infectious to some extent until the symptoms disappear. In general, children can continue to be infectious for up seven days, but sometimes longer.

People are most infectious soon after they develop symptoms, and can continue to spread the virus for up to five days after infection, seven days in children. If you are then still feeling unwell or your symptoms have worsened, contact your GP. Otherwise, after this time you can return to work or school without risk of spreading the virus.

Flu, including pandemic flu, is **spread from person to person** by close contact. You can catch the virus by touching objects (e.g. door handles, light switches) that have previously been touched by an infected person, then touching your own mouth, eyes or nose without first washing your hands. The virus can survive longer on hard surfaces than on soft or absorbent surfaces.

What you can do to help prevent spread

Everyone can play their part in helping to reduce the spread of pandemic flu. There are two key things to remember:

- Practice good hygiene – cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue and throw it away as soon as possible afterwards. **Catch it. Bin it. Kill it.**
- Wash your hands regularly, particularly after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose.

Staff should remain at home if they display any relevant symptoms, or inform their manager and go home if they first display symptoms while at work.

Building and line managers should ensure that hard surfaces (door handles, light switches, taps, kitchen worktops) are cleaned more regularly than usual, using normal cleaning products, where a member of staff is known to have been ill with flu.

Schools are being asked to consider providing an isolation room for use by any child who falls ill during the day until their parents can collect them. If a child falls ill at school they should be isolated (with appropriate supervision) and the parents informed as soon as possible. With the parents' agreement, it may be possible for an older child to go home alone, but a child who would normally be mature enough to go home alone may not be able to do so when he or she is unwell.

School staff have been advised not to sit/stay within one metre of the child unless the child needs assistance. This is to limit transmission to teachers and other school staff.

Getting the right messages to children

Children will be taught and encouraged in an age-appropriate way to follow the advice on personal hygiene (hand-washing, minimising contact between hands and mouth/nose, use of tissues). Schools have been asked to use Department of Health posters.

Anti virals and vaccines

Parents who suspect that their child may have swine flu are advised to contact the national pandemic flu service (NPFS **0800 1 513 100**). The NPFS

can assess who needs to visit a GP.

The parents of children in clinical at risk groups who normally receive the seasonal flu vaccine should contact their GP about receiving the new swine flu vaccine in due course.

Further more detailed information can be found at

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Pandemic-flu/Pages/QA.aspx>