

Update: Pandemic (H1N1) 2009

August 2009

According to state authorities, Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 (*Swine Flu*) is now quite widespread in the community. Children are susceptible to this virus, and schools can be sites of further spread. More information on the epidemiology and severity of the disease is awaited and the issues surrounding swine flu are being reviewed on a daily basis as new information becomes available.

Boards are reminded of the departmental advice provided in 2004 in relation to ensuring that they are included in the emergency plan framework for their area. A copy of this departmental circular (PBU 04/04) is available on www.ireland.anglican.org/swineflu

The key agency in relation to advice on a flu pandemic is the local Department of Public Health (HSE) and many of the decisions regarding advice and actions will be taken locally by personnel from that office. For that reason it is important that contact information for each school is provided to the local Department of Public Health, if that has not been done previously.

Schools should keep themselves informed of developments regarding Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 by checking the website www.ireland.anglican.org/swineflu which will stay abreast of the most recent updates from HSE and DES websites. In addition, information is available on the 24 Hour HSE Flu Information Line, Freephone 1800 94 11 00 and at the dedicated influenza pages at www.hse.ie

The National Pandemic Influenza Plan is available from www.hse.ie

In the interim, further and updated information is available from a range of other websites including:

<http://www.dohc.ie> [Department of Health and Children, which provides timely and regular advice and information]

<http://www.hpsc.ie> [The Health Protection Surveillance Centre]

What can the Board of Management do to help the school community stay healthy?

Prevention:

Adopting a common sense approach is recommended to minimise the impact on the school community. Preventing the introduction of flu is the first and most important step.

1 Respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette are key measures that everyone should use at all times to prevent the transmission of the flu virus. These measures include, when coughing and sneezing:

- *Turning one's head away from other people*
- *Using a tissue to cover the mouth and nose*
- *Placing the used tissue in a waste bin, preferably one with a cover or lid*
- *Washing hands, after disposing of a tissue, with soap and water, or alcohol based hand cleaners (with at least 60% alcohol), if such are already available in the school*

At this time, there is no requirement for schools to invest in masks.

Posters on respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette, courtesy of the HSE, are available on www.ireland.anglican.org/swineflu to download for display.

It may be wise to consider having a supply of tissues and where no washing facility is available, alcohol hand cleaners (with at least 60% alcohol) in common areas (e.g. at school entrances/waiting areas). See www.swineflu.ie to download posters for public places on stopping flu from spreading.

2 Review procedures in place for regular cleaning of classrooms, desks, equipment, work stations and the workplace generally. Wash hard surfaces e.g. door handles, etc. with a normal household cleaner as the virus can live on these surfaces. At this time there is no need to invest

in any specialised cleaning products or detergents. Waste, including used tissues, may be disposed of in the normal way. There is no need to take special precautions in the handling of such waste.

It may be necessary to have a meeting with the cleaning staff/contract cleaners, as appropriate, to reinforce the messages outlined above.

Communication with Staff

It is important to communicate with staff, in order to help protect them and reduce the impact on both staff, pupils and on the school community as a whole. It may be advisable to hold briefing meetings with all staff as soon as possible after the school reopens to convey information on the current situation, to plan for prevention and to outline how instances of flu illness will be dealt with. The agenda for such a meeting might include the following:

- Information on the swine flu; information on those at greatest risk who include people with chronic illness, aged over 65 or under 5, women who are pregnant, and severely obese people with a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 40 or more, people with other underlying conditions /illnesses /susceptibilities.
- Symptoms, which include:
 - *Sudden onset of symptoms*
 - *High Fever - temperature over 38°C/100.4°F*
 - *Severe weakness and fatigue*
 - *Dry cough*
 - *Aching muscles and joints*
 - *Sore throat*
 - *Headache*
 - *Runny nose*
 - *Vomiting / diarrhoea*
- Procedures to follow in the event of an occurrence in the class or in teacher's own home.

Communication with Parents

- The document *Frequently Asked Questions*, courtesy of the HSE, may be of assistance to schools in dealing with parents' queries. Individual Boards of Management may consider sending a copy to each family once school reopens.
- It may be useful to ask parents to consider what emergency childcare arrangements could be put in place in the event of school closure.

Communication with Pupils

- Each teacher could be encouraged to have a lesson on hygiene and respiratory etiquette once classes resume on return to school. Posters, courtesy of HSE, are available to help in this regard on www.ireland.anglican.org/swineflu. The school's individual hygiene procedures for pupils should be emphasised e.g. each child has an individual towel/tissues for hand drying. S/He does not share such facilities with others. Towels are stored appropriately e.g. in wash bag and regularly taken home for laundering.
- Students should cover the mouth and nose with a paper tissue when coughing or sneezing. If no tissue is available they should cough or sneeze into the inside of their elbow.
- Students should use a tissue once only and should dispose of it quickly and carefully (a covered dustbin is suitable).
- If there are students with particular susceptibilities such as cystic fibrosis, severe asthma or similar, parents should be requested to seek advice on appropriate procedures from the child's medical practitioner. Advice is in the course of preparation for special schools and pupils with special needs.

School-wide Procedures

- Ensure that all staff contact details are up to date.
- Ensure that emergency contact numbers for parents are updated immediately the school reopens.
- Have phone numbers of the local public health service available.

- Display posters and other reminders regarding washing hands prior to commencing work, after sneezing and coughing and after touching objects that may have been in contact with people exhibiting flu symptoms.
- Display posters and other reminders not to touch surfaces that may be contaminated with the flu virus and to avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Require sick staff/pupils to stay at home until they fully recover, usually seven days.

Absences of Staff

- The current swine flu outbreak is causing mild to moderate illness. During this pandemic, it may happen that staff members will be absent from work if they are ill with influenza. In planning for such absences, each Board of Management is advised to have an up to date list of substitute teachers readily available.
- In a situation where it becomes evident that management is unable to procure the services of sufficient staff to keep the school open, then a Board of Management may have to decide to close the school.

What happens if a staff member becomes unwell?

If a staff member begins to develop influenza-like symptoms s/he should be advised:

- To stay at home, to avoid spreading infection to others. Guidance on certification is currently being prepared and will be available on the website in due course.
- To phone the HSE 24 hr Flu Information Line to check symptoms, or visit www.swineflu.ie. The Flu Line is on Freephone 1800 94 11 00.
- That most people will be able to recover at home within a few days without needing medical care.
- That anyone in a high risk group should contact his/her GP surgery by phone. [High risk groups include people with chronic illness, aged over 65 or under 5, women who are pregnant, and severely obese people with a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 40 or more, people with other underlying conditions /illnesses/susceptibilities]

If a staff member is sick, who else may be affected?

- If a staff member becomes ill and it turns out s/he has swine flu, other staff members should remain vigilant for any flu-like symptoms in themselves or others. If staff members feel unwell, they should remain at home, call the Flu line and, if necessary, contact their local GP surgery as indicated above.
- Any sick staff should stay at home for seven days from the onset of symptoms of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009.

Dealing with an Outbreak

- If there is an outbreak of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 or a cluster of respiratory illness in a school, the local Department of Public Health should undertake risk assessment. There may be instances where class or school closure is appropriate. Unless the local Department of Public Health advise the management of the school to close as a precautionary measure, the school should remain open. A list of the Department of Public Health offices (HSE) is available at www.hse.ie/eng/Find_a_Service/Public_Health/
- As is normally the case where management finds it is necessary to close some or all of the school, it is not necessary to obtain the Department of Education and Science's approval in advance. Schools should simply act in accordance with the advice of the health authorities. A school closing on foot of advice is however requested to advise the Department of Education and Science of the position without delay. Through continuing contact with the public health authority, a school will be advised as to when it may re-open.
- Any decision, based on public health advice, to close a range of or all schools/colleges (and where the number of schools/colleges affected is such that making individual contact locally would be impractical) the advice regarding closure will be announced by a statement through the national and local media with supporting information provided on the Department of Education and Science website.
- The normal rules in relation to staff absenteeism apply to Pandemic (H1N1) 2009. Decisions to remain open or to close having regard to the unavailability of staff due to illness in the event

of an outbreak of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009, are a matter for each individual school Board, as is the case at present where any significant number of teachers are absent due to illness. Each Board of Management must assess the viability of remaining open having regard to the number of staff absent/available. The position of students that may already have arrived at school, before the position on teacher absence becomes fully known, should be taken into account. This may mean that in the case of a school, for example, it remains open on the day in question with the available staff carrying out a supervision role over the students where normal classroom and tuition activity is not possible.

- The general position regarding school openings and closures is set out in department circulars 11/95 and 107/2007 and continue to apply at present.
- Boards should however consider how to organise for orderly closure, if necessary e.g.
 - What information will be conveyed regarding a reopening date, how and by whom?
 - What will those who are still symptomatic on date of reopening be advised to do?
 - Establish a system for staff to report their status during closure, including what information they are required to communicate (and how) to the Board and when they are expected NOT to report to work.
 - Ensure all staff emergency contact information is up to date.

Pupil presenting with symptoms of flu while at school

What happens if a pupil is seen to have flu like symptoms while at school?

- Pupil is isolated and parent /guardian is contacted and asked to come and take him/her home.
- Pupil is advised to stay at home, to avoid spreading infection to others.
- Parents are advised that anyone in a high risk group should contact his/her GP surgery by phone.
- Pupils and staff in the class(es) affected should be advised to be vigilant for symptoms of flu.
- All parents are notified if a case of flu is confirmed and are advised to contact their family doctor if their child/ren develop further symptoms or are worried, particularly if they are in a high risk group, as outlined above.

Visitors

- Visitor numbers should be kept to the absolute minimum necessary to reduce the risk of contamination.
- Bring school's procedures for prevention of flu to the attention of visitors.
- Consider asking visitors in advance of attending the school to identify if they may have flu symptoms or if they have had contact with a person infected with flu.
- Ask visitors to provide information as to where and how they may be contacted after their visit, in the event that flu develops in the school and they need to be notified.

Media

- Boards of Management should be clear as to what information will be conveyed, should questions arise from local media in regard to staff or pupils who are ill or in regard to the school's procedures for managing this situation.
- If discussing any such issues, Boards should bear in mind that it is vital that the staff/pupils' right to privacy is strictly adhered to and due regard is had to data protection.