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Swine flu and schools

Advice for the public



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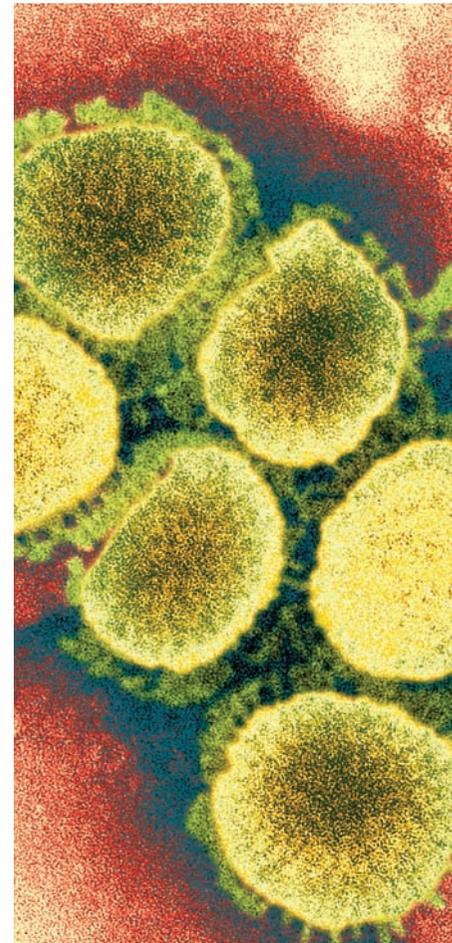
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This leaflet contains information about swine flu and the role of the Health Protection Agency in relation to schools

Swine flu is a virus that is particularly affecting children and young adults. Children are proving to be highly efficient carriers of the swine flu (H1N1) virus and schools provide the perfect environment for it to spread.

The HPA provides advice to schools on whether they should close or stay open and also on measures schools can take to try to slow the spread of the disease. This leaflet aims to explain how we make our decisions and let you know how you can help to combat swine flu.

What is the HPA's policy on school closures?

The decision to close a school is made by the school and the local authority. The HPA will provide detailed advice based on a thorough assessment of all the risks and will only recommend closure if this will help to contain and lessen the spread of the virus.

For example, where the virus has spread in a community and there is regular mixing with family and close friends outside of the school, closure would not slow the spread of the virus.

There is a case in our school – why is it still open?

If there has been a confirmed case of swine flu at your school, the HPA will perform a thorough risk assessment. Every risk assessment is judged against the same principles but the HPA will also take into account the local circumstances before making a recommendation.

If your school is still open, it means that the confirmed case is not considered to have posed a risk of further spread to other pupils. Another reason for the school to remain open could be that if the virus is circulating within your community, closing the school would not help to slow the spread of the virus as people could still be exposed outside the school.

There are high absentee rates at my child's school – surely this must be a swine flu outbreak?

Schools are closely monitoring absentee rates and are looking out for the symptoms of flu among pupils and staff. If there are high absentee rates the school should contact either the local authority or the HPA so that this can be followed up.

My child is in the same class as a confirmed case – why is s/he not receiving antiviral medication?

Antiviral medication will only be offered to confirmed cases, their household

contacts and high-risk contacts such as pregnant women, people with underlying illnesses or low immune systems. This is because where the virus has spread widely in the community, extensive use of antiviral medication to prevent infection is no longer appropriate as people are likely to be repeatedly exposed to the disease.

Why isn't antiviral medication given out to everybody?

In some instances where there are significant levels of local transmission of swine flu, children and adults are likely to be repeatedly exposed to the disease, making preventative medication ineffective.

Isn't it better for my child to catch this now to develop some immunity in case this comes back more seriously?

There is good evidence that in the majority of swine flu patients the disease is generally mild, but it is also proving severe in a small minority of cases. It is preferable to avoid exposure to the virus if possible, which also helps to protect high-risk groups from unnecessary risk. However, children should not be kept off school if they are well and their school is open.

Our school is open again – what does this mean?

If your school has reopened, it means that any confirmed cases are not considered to pose a risk of further spread to other pupils, or that the virus is already circulating within your community and keeping the school closed would not help to slow the spread of the virus as people could still be exposed outside the school.

What can schools and parents do to slow the spread?

Our advice to people with flu-like symptoms remains the same. Anyone who has a fever and flu-like symptoms should stay at home and contact NHS Direct on 0845 4647 or their GP by phone for advice. They should not go to school or work, and should not attend health settings such as GP surgeries or hospital A&E departments. For more details call the swine flu information line on 0800 1513 513. Everyone can play their part by practising good hygiene:

- Washing hands frequently with soap and water to reduce the spread of virus from your hands to face or to other people.
- Cleaning hard surfaces (e.g. door handles) frequently using a normal cleaning product.
- Covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue when possible.
- Disposing of dirty tissues promptly and carefully.
- Making sure children follow this advice.