

October 30, 2009
(Revised November 4)

Dear Parents and Guardians,

Re: Pandemic H1N1 flu virus (swine flu) in schools

As Ottawa enters the second wave of the H1N1 pandemic, I want to share some important information about how to protect your family, yourself and the community.

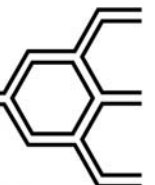
Prevention works. Now that the vaccine is available, I strongly encourage you and your children to get vaccinated **when the supply of vaccine allows**. Children over six months are eligible for the H1N1 vaccine. Children under 10 years of age require two doses, 21 days apart. The free vaccine is currently available through the Ottawa Public Health vaccination clinics. **We are currently focusing on priority groups, which include children from 6 months to 5 years, as well as children with chronic conditions. The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care announced on November 4 that school-aged children will be next in line to receive the vaccine.** For information on locations and schedules, please contact 3-1-1 or visit ottawa.ca/health. Clinics fill quickly, and I urge you to be patient and bring toys and activities to make the wait more tolerable.

If your child becomes ill with flu-like symptoms such as cough, fever, aches and fatigue, please keep him or her home. Most people do not require medical attention when they experience the flu. Even though flu symptoms can make you feel really sick and can last for several days, in most cases you can care for yourself and your children at home. Get adequate rest, drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration, and control aches and fever with ibuprofen or acetaminophen (children under 18 must not use acetylsalicylic acid).

Sometimes it is difficult to know what to do when your child is sick. Ottawa Public Health has launched a new decision aid for parents at ottawa.ca/health. This aid asks some questions to help determine when you need to see a physician. You may also call the Ottawa Public Health Information Line at 613-580-6744 to speak to a nurse. Please understand that because of very heavy call volume, you may experience delays. You can also get telenursing consultation by calling Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000, though we understand that they, too, are experiencing heavy call volumes.

Here are some quick guidelines for determining when treatment is necessary:

- See your physician or primary care provider within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms if you are pregnant or have a medical condition related to heart, lungs or immune system. Also see a primary care provider if symptoms get worse quickly.
- Go to a hospital emergency department if symptoms become severe – such as shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, lips turning blue, extreme weakness or passing out.



As absenteeism rises in Ottawa schools, parents understandably become concerned for the well-being and safety of their children. I can assure you that Ottawa Public Health has worked with local school boards to ensure infection control procedures and education are in place. The H1N1 virus is circulating in our community, along with other respiratory diseases, and we can assume these viruses are present in all schools. I advise parents to:

- Keep children who show flu-like symptoms home until they have been fever-free for 24 hours AND they are feeling better. Children who are sick should cover coughs and sneezes and stay at least two metres away from healthy people whenever possible.
- Make sure children who are well go about their business as usual and continue good practices of hand washing. There is no need to avoid school or large gatherings when you are well. The intent of our pandemic plan is to minimize social disruption as well as serious illness.

We expect this will be a challenging flu season and everyone has a role to play. By paying attention to these key messages on preventing and treating the flu, you can help reduce the impact of H1N1 on your family and our community.

Sincerely,

Dr. Isra Levy
Medical Officer of Health

