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Dear Parents,

As expected, we are experiencing an increase in flu-like illness in McHenry County, along with the rest of the region and state. The following is some information about what symptoms to look for in your children, what to do if your child becomes ill, who is being tested for H1N1 flu, the implications for a confirmed case of H1N1 flu in schools, and what your schools may be doing to reduce the transmission of H1N1 flu.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

The symptoms of the flu include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, fatigue and sometimes diarrhea and vomiting. If your child gets sick with these symptoms, please keep them home until 24 hours after their fever has gone away without the use of fever-reducing medications. Your child should also avoid contact with other people, except to get medical care. This will reduce the likelihood of getting someone else sick.

Most people with H1N1 flu have had a mild illness and have not needed medical care or antiviral drugs. The same is true of seasonal flu. However, some people are more likely to get flu complications. They should talk to a health care provider about whether they need to be examined if they get flu symptoms this season. These people include pregnant women, people with chronic illnesses (visit <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/sick.htm> for a list of chronic illnesses), and children. Also, it's possible for healthy people to develop severe illness from the flu, so anyone concerned about their illness should consult a health care provider.

Children experiencing the following symptoms need to seek medical care immediately:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Fever with a rash

These symptoms are considered emergency warning signs of severe illness in children. If your child develops any of the emergency warning signs, please seek medical attention immediately.

WHO IS BEING TESTED FOR H1N1 FLU

Currently, only the most severe cases (those who are hospitalized) are tested for H1N1 flu with the purpose of monitoring severity of the H1N1 flu. Most people with flu-like illness will be diagnosed with the flu by their symptoms or by rapid influenza testing, which is done by a physician and /or ER. The rapid influenza test is typically done in a physician's office and/or ER within an hour and does **NOT** confirm H1N1 flu. The rapid tests will only determine if your child has the flu or does not have the flu. From a treatment perspective, it is not necessary to determine whether someone has H1N1 or seasonal flu because the treatment options are the same. At the same time, most of the influenza that is currently circulating is the H1N1 flu, as opposed to seasonal flu, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); however, this may change.

For these reasons and because the H1N1 flu is so widespread, MCDH does not recommend that schools notify parents of a confirmed case of H1N1 flu. Instead, MCDH recommends that schools experiencing a high rate of illness notify parents of the high rate of illness and the steps that the school is taking.

WHAT SCHOOLS ARE DOING

Schools in McHenry County are working closely with MCDH and are participating in daily absentee surveillance. When the number of absent students goes above the normal number, MCDH contacts those schools to assess the situation and provide steps to reduce the risk of illness transmission. Some of the steps your school may be taking include:

- Increasing the frequency of cleaning commonly touched surfaces, such as table/desk tops, bathrooms, drinking fountains, doorknobs
- Separating ill students and staff as much as possible before they can go home
- Teaching proper hand hygiene and providing time to wash hands
- Teaching proper cough etiquette
- Making sure ill children stay home until at least 24 hours after their fever has resolved without the use of fever-reducing medication
- Encouraging students, especially those at high risk who get ill, to seek medical attention within 48 hours of the start of their symptoms

If the flu becomes more severe at your child's school where there are high rates of flu-like illness absences, schools are implementing the following are steps, in addition to the ones recommended above:

- Screening of students on the first day they return to school from being out sick for fever
- Screening of all students and staff for fever and flu symptoms
- Permitting high risk students and staff to stay home until the flu becomes less severe
- Extending the time your child needs to stay home when they are sick to 7 days
- Having students with ill household members stay home for 5 days
- Increasing social distance (distance between students, staff)
- Cancelling school extracurricular activities
- School dismissal – very last resort! School and health officials will balance the risks of influenza in their community against the disruption dismissals will cause in both education and the wider community. Taking the above steps will help to reduce the possibility of school dismissal.

In an effort to reduce the risk of influenza transmission to **medically fragile children**, your school may also be implementing the following steps:

- Increasing social distances within the school environment between the medically fragile student classroom and other classrooms and students
- Keeping teachers in the same classrooms; limiting contact between teachers of medically fragile students with other students or teachers
- Keeping students in the classroom for lunch
- Cancelling classes or activities that bring medically fragile students together with students from other classrooms
- Avoiding the use of any common areas in the school, such as cafeteria, gymnasiums, libraries
- If common bathrooms must be used, wiping handles, faucets and doorknobs prior to use
- Discouraging the use of school buses and public transit

For Medically Fragile students, if influenza severity increases

- students and staff at high risk for influenza complications may consider staying home from school while influenza transmission is high in their community if they, or their families, are concerned about their ability to avoid influenza at school.
- The decision about whether to stay home should be made in consultation between parents and the child's health care provider.
- If students stay home, efforts should also be made to decrease their exposure in other ways, for example, by avoiding large public gatherings.
- Well students should be expected to continue their education while at home as much as possible.

Please contact your school administrator if you decide to keep your medically fragile child home or if you have additional questions.

GET VACCINATED!

The best way to protect yourself and your children from the H1N1 flu is to get vaccinated against it. The H1N1 flu vaccine will be offered at several locations later this fall, such as your school, physician's offices, community clinics and pharmacies. Please check www.mcdh.info to find locations and more information on the H1N1 flu vaccine.

If you have more questions about H1N1 flu please visit www.mcdh.info, flu.gov or call MCDH's H1N1 Flu Hotline at (815)334-2800.

Sincerely,

Patrick J. McNulty
Patrick J. McNulty
Public Health Administrator