

## **Q&A ON AH1N1 (SWINE FLU) FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES, SCHOOLS & EARLY YEARS SETTINGS**

**14 AUGUST 2009**

### **Start of autumn term – reopening**

**Q Does the Government expect schools and early years settings to reopen as usual in mid August?**

A Yes, schools and early years settings are expected to reopen as planned. The current incidence of flu in Scotland is relatively low and the virus is already circulating in the community in many areas, despite school and nursery closures last term.

**Q Should we reopen even if there are children, pupils (or staff) who have suspected swine flu?**

A Yes, as long as it is made clear to parents that children and young people with flu-like symptoms should be kept at home until they are better. Staff with flu-like symptoms should also stay off work.

**Q What if a child or young person is diagnosed with suspected swine flu after we open? What should we do and who should we inform?**

A Closure is not necessary. If a pupil is taken ill in school, they should be isolated from others until a parent or carer can come – as soon as possible - to collect them. It will be a matter for schools and local authorities to discuss with Health Boards and local health protection teams whether and how they should be informed. Schools and early years settings may wish to inform parents about the steps being taken to reduce the risks of infection in order to alleviate possible concerns.

**Q Why the change in Government advice? Back in May and June, everyone was being advised to close for a single case. Now schools and early years settings are remaining open even if a several pupils have flu.**

A In the first few weeks of the swine flu outbreak in Scotland schools and nurseries were advised to close as a containment measure – to try to prevent the spread of the virus. At that time, there was limited evidence of how virulent the virus was, but it is not now considered to be as virulent as was originally thought. As swine flu is now circulating in the community, people – including school pupils - are likely to be repeatedly exposed to the virus in their everyday lives. Closing schools and early years settings, or keeping them closed, would now be relatively ineffective as a precautionary measure.

**Q What about special schools for children with medical conditions (or such children in mainstream schools) who might be considered at**

### **higher risk of complications should they catch swine flu?**

A The advice for special schools is the same as for mainstream schools. They should reopen. However, if a pupil has displayed symptoms in school (or was in school the day before displaying symptoms), the school will wish to contact their local health protection team for specific advice, particularly where there may be pupils who have medical conditions that make them more susceptible to or vulnerable from infection.

In turn, the parents of such children who have concerns should be encouraged to discuss them with their GP and the school.

### **Possibility of future closures**

**Q The Pandemic Flu Framework (of October 2007) said that the Government might advise all schools to close when a pandemic virus reached their area. Might this still happen?**

A There are no current plans to issue such advice. The virus is not considered to be as virulent as was originally thought. However, matters are being kept under constant review at national level. If the virus were to change and become more virulent, the Government would review its advice.

### **What would happen if a decision were taken to close a school?**

A While it is hoped that all schools would try to stay open and operate safely, individual schools may face temporary local problems that could lead them to have to close (eg unusually high levels of staff absence). In practice the decision to close a local authority school for reasons of business continuity will be made by headteachers in conjunction with the local authority. They should work with the local authority to ensure that there is full communication with parents. The local authority should in turn keep the Scottish Government informed in order to contribute to an accurate national picture.

**Q Should a school or early years setting take advice from its local Health Board or the local health protection team before closing?**

A Individual closures will most likely arise for reasons of business continuity i.e. staff absence to a level that call into question the safe running of the school. If the school or setting were considering closure for such reasons they would not need to seek advice from the Health Board. If a school or setting was closed, however, it would be important to alert the local Health Board or local health protection team to ensure that all parties are aware of the reasons for the closure and to minimise any risk of misunderstanding of the situation.

If the issue is the implications for vulnerable groups of children (those with medical conditions which make them more susceptible to the virus and its

effects) of the school or setting remaining open or closing, it will be vital to seek advice from the Health Board or local health protection team.

**Q What teaching and learning should pupils receive when schools are closed?**

A Where schools may be closed for an extended period in a flu pandemic, steps should be taken to maintain – as far as is possible - a reasonable degree of teaching and learning. Building on existing good practice, schools and local authorities can make use of GLOW, the internet and other ICT for the purposes of maintaining learning as far as possible. Guidance on supporting learning if schools are closed for extended periods in a flu epidemic is available via the following link - <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/08/03093630/0>

**Q How will schools and early years settings that close know when it is safe to re-open?**

A That depends on the reason for closing. If local health protection teams advise closure for health reasons, they would also advise how long that closure should be for and set out the criteria to be satisfied before the school could re-open safely. They would monitor the situation during the closure and, shortly before the school or setting was considering re-opening, advise if it should re-open or extend its period of closure.

If the school or setting closed for reasons of business continuity, then it would be for the school or setting themselves to judge when to re-open – for example, when sufficient staff had returned from sick leave or when alternative arrangements had been made.

**Staying safe while open**

**Q While schools and early years settings remain open, how can they reduce the risk of infection?**

A The Scottish Government published guidance on infection control for different settings, which is accessible via the following link – <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Health/health/AvianInfluenza/PandemicFlu/planning/infection-control>

The most important measures are to keep symptomatic children and pupils out of school and early years settings, and to maintain good hygiene practices – washing hands with soap and hot water and using tissues. It will be important to ensure that supplies of all of these are plentiful, available and are topped up frequently.

Information packs supporting the re-running of the 2007 hand-washing campaign for 3 to 6 year olds have been sent to all nurseries and primary schools. Supplies of the new “sneezing boy” and “sneezing girl” posters have

also been sent to all schools.

**Q When can pupils (or members of staff) return to school or early years settings after they have been off ill?**

A Not while they still have any symptoms. Once all the symptoms have passed and they feel well enough to return, they can do so.

**Q Should pupils (or staff) be asked for a 'fit to return' notice before being re-admitted to school after they have been ill with suspected swine flu?**

A No. Swine flu is not a notifiable illness, and pupils (or staff) returning to schools should be treated the same as they would be following any other illness.

**Q What if parents keep pupils who are well, off school?**

A While schools are open parents should send their children to school unless they have any symptoms. Unless the children are 'home educated' parents have a legal responsibility to do so. They should be urged not to keep healthy children off school.

**Q Should schools continue to go on school trips or undertake other educational activities out of school?**

A There is no reason why schools etc should not continue to go on school trips both in this country and abroad or other out of school activities. If the trip is abroad we recommend that the school look at the latest available information on the FCO website - [www.fco.gov.uk/en/travelling-and-living-overseas/swine-flu](http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travelling-and-living-overseas/swine-flu).

**Q (from staff) I am in what I understand to be a 'higher risk' group (eg chronic respiratory illness, pregnancy) with respect to swine flu. Several children in my school have the illness; the school remains open and, though those children are now off school, there must be a chance that others have contracted it and will soon show symptoms. Should I stay off school or take special precautions?**

A While there is generally no need for staff to stay away from school unless they experience flu-like symptoms, if a member of staff is concerned because of other medical conditions they may have, they should be advised to consult their GP for further advice.

They should certainly contact their GP for advice and/or treatment if they have any flu-like symptoms.

Staff should remain vigilant for any flu-like symptoms in the children and be sure that parents have been advised to keep children at home should they become unwell. It is important that any symptomatic children (or indeed staff)

are identified, isolated, and sent home.

Good personal hygiene (on the part of both staff and children) is an essential part of reducing the number of flu cases in the community. The school or setting should have plentiful and available soap, hot water and tissues and arrangements for the safe disposal of used tissues.

**Q (from supply/peripatetic teachers) The school I have been working in today has many cases of suspected swine flu. I am due to work in another school tomorrow, but that school appears to have no cases. Can I work in that school tomorrow, or should I stay away to stop me spreading the virus?**

A If an individual has no flu-like symptoms, there is no reason for them not to work in another school. If they have any flu-like symptoms they should stay off work.

### **PARENTS' QUESTIONS (will also be posted on *Parentzone*)**

**Q What does the 'treatment' phase of the pandemic mean?**

A Because the flu virus is already circulating in the community, the focus is now on treating people with suspected swine flu rather than closing schools or nurseries to try and 'contain' or slow the spread of the virus down - something which did not prove to be very effective.

**Q Will there still be closures of schools and nurseries?**

A In future, closures are more likely to arise because levels of illness among staff may mean that the schools or nurseries cannot continue to operate safely. There could still though be closures on health grounds – for instance to protect groups of more vulnerable children - if the local authority and Health Board considered that necessary.

**Q There have been cases of suspected swine flu in my child's school (or nursery) but it has remained open, should I send my child in?**

A While schools remain open, you should continue to send your child to school - unless they have any flu-like symptoms. You would be advised if the school were to close and what to do then.

**Q What happens if a child becomes ill at school or nursery?**

A You would be contacted and asked to collect and take them home. You should then contact your GP or NHS 24 (on 08454 242424)

**Q What can I do to help?**

A Make sure that the school or nursery has your up-to-date contact

details - address, phone number (home, work and mobile) and any e-mail details - in case they need to get in touch with you.

**Q My child has a history of other medical problems and I believe they are at greater risk should they catch swine flu. Is it safe for them to go to school while there have been cases of suspected swine flu there; are there other precautions I should take?**

A Children should continue to attend school unless they have any flu-like symptoms. If you have particular concerns about your child's medical condition and vulnerability to swine flu and its effects, you should discuss these matters both with your GP and with the school.

The school may in turn wish to consult the Health Board or local health protection team about such matters.

**Q Is it better for children to catch swine flu now in order to build up their resilience and immunity?**

A No. We are still learning about this strain of swine flu and who is most at risk of complications if they contract it. There would also be a risk of the child going on to infect other vulnerable people.

Even with mild flu, complications can occur, leading to more serious illness. With this in mind, it would be wrong not to take all possible precautions against catching swine flu.

**Q What should I do if my child (or indeed anyone else in the household) shows any signs of flu-like illness?**

A If your child is unwell, or you are concerned about their health in any way, you should contact your local GP or NHS 24 (on 08454 242424).

You should keep them at home and tell the school, nursery etc.

**Q When should my child return to school or nursery?**

A Not while they still have any symptoms. Once all the symptoms have passed and they feel well enough to return, they can do so.

**Q Is hand-washing and the use of tissues important?**

Yes, very, and as much in the home as in the school or nursery. Frequent hand-washing and use of tissues to cover coughs and sneezes is important in helping to slow the spread of swine flu among children and young people, because they are more likely than others to catch and spread it.

**Q Will my child be vaccinated against swine flu? How soon?**

A The first supplies of vaccine will be used to vaccinate those people who

are most at risk, for instance those with medical conditions (adults and children) which make them particularly vulnerable to swine flu and its effects, and front line health and social care staff who, because of their jobs, are most likely to catch swine flu or to infect these vulnerable groups.

Ministers will continue to be guided by the medical experts about the further vaccination programme, reflecting on the way the pandemic develops.

There will be a full public information campaign to answer people's detailed questions about the vaccine and vaccination programme as it gets underway.

**Q I am concerned about the side effects of Tamiflu on my child?**

A If your GP has prescribed Tamiflu for your child, you should follow any advice that they gave you.

If your child starts to show any side effects or you are concerned in any other way about their state of health – especially if it seems to worsen - you should contact your GP again (or NHS 24 on 08454 242424) as soon as possible.

**MORE INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE via the following links –**

Health Protection Scotland: [www.hps.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk)

[Latest information and advice from NHS24](#)

[Information leaflet](#)

[Scottish Government Questions and Answers](#)