

Talking to Children About H1N1 Flu : A Teacher Resource*

Helping children cope with anxiety regarding the flu requires providing prevention information without causing alarm. The following guidelines and age appropriate talking points should help address classroom questions from students.

Guidelines

Remain calm and reassuring. Children will react to and follow your verbal and nonverbal reactions. What you say and do about the flu virus and current prevention efforts can either increase or decrease your child's anxiety. If true, emphasize to your children that they and your family are fine. Remind them that you and the adults at their school are there to keep them safe and healthy. Let your children talk about their feelings and help put their concerns into the appropriate perspective.

Know the symptoms of Swine Flu and how it spreads. Symptoms of H1N1 flu include fever, sore throat, and cough. Some people also have a runny nose, fatigue, body aches, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. The virus is transmitted through the coughing or sneezing of people infected with the virus. People may also become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouths or noses. The virus is not spread by eating pork or other foods.

Review basic hygiene practices. Encourage children to practice everyday good hygiene by washing their hands, by covering their mouths with a tissue when they sneeze or cough, and by not sharing food or drinks. These simple steps are very effective at preventing the spread of flu and other illnesses. Giving children guidance on what they can do to prevent infection gives them a greater sense of control over the flu and will help to reduce their anxiety.

Be honest and accurate. In the absence of factual information, children often imagine situations far worse than reality. Don't ignore their concerns, but rather explain that at the present moment the vast majority of people, even those who are sick, will be okay. Nationwide, the number of people who are currently sick is very small. Children can be told that there are many ways to avoid the virus and that doctors can help to treat people who do get sick.

Discuss new rules or practices at school. Many schools will be enforcing prevention habits. This might include more frequent hand washing or use of antibacterial soaps; for older children, schools may temporarily limit activities where students are in close proximity or sharing items. Your school nurse or principal will send information home. Be sure to discuss this with your child. Contact your school nurse with any specific questions.

Make yourself available. Children may need extra attention from you and may want to talk about their concerns and questions. Make time or utilize your building counselor

Age Appropriate Talking Points

Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. However, don't avoid giving them age appropriate information. Be patient; children and youth do not always talk about their concerns readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk to you or the counselor, such as hovering around you. It is very typical for younger children to ask a few questions, return to playing, then come back to ask more questions.

Keep Explanations Age Appropriate

- **Early elementary** school children need brief, simple information that should balance H1N1 Flu facts with appropriate reassurances that their schools and homes are safe and that adults are there to help keep them healthy and to take care of them if they do get sick. Give simple examples of the steps people take every day to stop germs, such as washing hands.
- **Upper elementary** and early middle school children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what will happen if the H1N1 Flu comes to their school or community. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to prevent germs from spreading.
- **Upper middle school and high school** students are able to discuss the issue in a more in-depth (adultlike) fashion and can be referred directly to appropriate sources of H1N1 Flu facts (e.g., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Provide honest, accurate, and factual information about the current status of the H1N1 Flu. Having such knowledge can help them feel a sense of control.

Summary of Suggested Points to Emphasize When Talking to Children

- There are things we can do to stay healthy and avoid spreading disease, such as washing our hands, covering our mouths with a tissue when we sneeze or cough, and staying home when we don't feel well.
- Adults at home and school are taking care of your health and safety. If you have concerns, please talk to an adult you trust.
- It is important that all students treat each other with respect and not jump to conclusions about who may or may not have the flu.

***Adapted from Talking to Children About Swine Flu (H1N1): A Parent Resource,
http://www.nasponline.org/resources/Talking_With_Children_About_Flu_FINAL.pdf**