

## **Influenza Questions and Answers for Administrators**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued guidance for schools related to influenza (flu, including the seasonal and H1N1 strain, formerly called the swine flu) prevention on August 7, 2009. Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS), in collaboration with the Baltimore County Department of Health, has reviewed and updated its procedures for assuring a safe school environment. NOTE: This is an evolving situation so recommendations change, sometimes quickly. This guidance is accurate as of the date it is written. Updates and changes to guidance for schools will be distributed through the Superintendent's Bulletin and posted to the Office of Health Services' Web site at <http://www.bcps.org/offices/sss/health/>.

Some frequently asked questions about seasonal and H1N1 flu:

### **Is H1N1 something we need to be worried about?**

The CDC advises us that currently H1N1 is causing mild disease, similar to seasonal flu. However, seasonal flu can be a deadly illness, so prevention is very important. (On average 1,000 people die each year in Maryland from seasonal flu or its complications. In Maryland, six people have died of H1N1.)

Some differences between seasonal and H1N1 flu are:

- Timing – seasonal flu typically declines during the summer months. H1N1 has continued to occur in the United States throughout the summer of 2009. This may indicate an earlier than usual onset of flu illness in schools.
- A larger population of people vulnerable to infection – younger persons seem to be particularly vulnerable to H1N1 infection. CDC laboratory studies have shown that about 1/3 of persons older than 60 have immunity to the H1N1 virus while almost no persons under the age of 60 show any immunity to the virus.
- Immunizations – Typically we have a flu vaccine available to offer to persons at high risk of flu complications. While seasonal flu vaccine normally contains an H1N1 flu component, this year's seasonal flu vaccine will not protect against the novel H1N1 flu virus that has been recently circulating worldwide. A vaccine for this strain is currently in development but will not be widely available until mid-fall at the earliest. This means that high-risk populations are vulnerable to infection with H1N1 flu and increases the need for closely following prevention procedures like hand washing and cough/sneeze etiquette.

### **What are the recommendations about hand washing?**

Washing hands regularly and thoroughly with soap and water is the single best way to protect against infection with flu. Students and employees must have access to soap and water and must be provided time to wash their hands. Hand washing is recommended after coughing or sneezing into hands, before eating, after using the restroom and before/after using shared items like computer keyboards and physical education

equipment. Administrators need to remind staff of the procedures for alerting building services staff when a restroom is out of soap or paper towels.

### **What if soap and water are not available?**

In most cases, soap and water are available in our buildings. If soap and water are not readily available, an alcohol-based hand sanitizer containing 60 percent alcohol is effective at reducing the number of germs on the hands.

### **Should I purchase hand sanitizer?**

No. Since using soap and water is the best method for hand washing, you should be working to make sure there are supplies and time for hand washing. Hand sanitizer is only being placed in locker rooms and computer labs based on recommendations from the Baltimore County Department of Health and Baltimore County Public Schools' Office of Health Services and Department of Physical Facilities.

### **Can hand sanitizers be used in the classroom?**

BCPS provides soap and water for hand washing in schools. Students and employees may bring hand sanitizer for personal use. In places where soap and water are not available, hand sanitizers may be used.

### **Is special cleaning needed to protect students and employees?**

The CDC guidance states that routine cleaning is appropriate, and special cleaning is not needed. Studies have shown that influenza virus can survive on environmental surfaces and can infect a person for up to 2-8 hours after being deposited on the surface. BCPS' employees responsible for cleaning buildings and materials (e.g., musical instruments, science goggles, etc.) have been reminded in August 2009 of the need to adhere to established cleaning procedures.

The Baltimore County Department of Health has advised us that it is not practical to disinfect computer keyboards in computer labs between users. For this reason, hand sanitizer will be installed in computer labs for use before and after use of shared computers. In addition, students should be directed to wash their hands with soap and water before and after using shared items like classroom-based shared computers.

### **What about wearing masks?**

The CDC has indicated that students who have influenza-like illness (fever of 100 degrees or above combined with a cough and/or sore throat) should wear a mask while awaiting pick-up from school. Masks will be provided to school nurses.

CDC guidance also indicated that staff providing direct health care to students with influenza-like illness should be offered personal protective equipment. The Baltimore

County Department of Health has informed us that staff in the health suite should consider using a mask when providing health care in close proximity to a student with influenza-like illness. Per CDC guidelines, masks will only be provided by BCPS for students with influenza-like illness who are awaiting parent pick-up in the health suite and for nurses or health assistants who are providing health care to students with influenza-like illness.

### **May teachers or other staff wear masks to keep from getting the flu?**

The CDC guidance indicates that the effectiveness of masks worn in community settings at preventing infection with flu is not scientifically proven. Consequently, CDC recommends that there is no need for employees in non-health care settings like school classrooms to wear masks. If an employee feels a mask is warranted, the employee should provide documentation from his/her health care provider regarding the need for the mask. This documentation should be submitted to the Office of Risk Management for review. As with other medical conditions, accommodation plans will be made in the best interest of the employee based on medical recommendations and a review of the employee's job duties.

### **May students wear masks?**

The wearing of masks in a school by students should be viewed under the perspective of the dress code. If it disrupts the school environment, a principal may prohibit the wearing of masks. If a parent indicates that the child has a health reason (e.g., immune suppression, asthma, etc.) for wearing the mask, the parent should provide a note from the child's health care provider to the school nurse for review.

### **Will we be giving H1N1 vaccine at school when it becomes available?**

The Baltimore County Department of Health is developing a plan for the distribution of H1N1 vaccine. At this time, there are no plans for administering H1N1 vaccines at school during the school day.

### **Will schools be closed?**

The CDC guidance from August 2009 indicates that they have updated their recommendations regarding school closure. They now use the term "school dismissal" to address the closing of school for students. The guidance indicates that school dismissal is a local decision and may be made based on local conditions. School dismissal is not a strategy that is being generally considered unless the disease caused by H1N1 becomes more serious than it is at this time.

**August 25, 2009**

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