

Frequently asked questions: Influenza (flu) information for parents

Seasonal influenza 2010-2011

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The following advice is for parents of children in all educational institutions, including crèches, childcare, schools, and third level institutions. Unless otherwise mentioned 'educational institution' applies to all of the above.

We are now experiencing our annual flu season and, as had been expected, this year the predominant flu virus is the H1N1 virus also known as swine flu. We are now seeing a major rise in people attending GPs and GP out of hours services with flu like illnesses.

Is influenza dangerous?

Most people infected with the influenza virus have a mild to moderate illness, but some have more severe illness.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

The symptoms of flu include:

- Temperature over 38 °C/100.4 °F that begins suddenly **and** some of the following:
 - Dry cough
 - Sore throat
 - Muscle aches and pains
 - Headache
 - Runny nose
 - Severe weakness and fatigue
 - Vomiting/diarrhoea (in some cases)

What are the differences between influenza and the common cold?

It can sometimes be difficult to distinguish between the common cold and flu. The main difference is that the symptoms of influenza come on rapidly and are typically accompanied by muscle aches and a fever. The common cold has a more gradual onset and is associated with a runny nose and sneezing. For a full list of differences between influenza and the common cold, please see the table below.

Symptoms	Influenza	Common Cold
Onset	Sudden	Slow
Fever	Characteristically High (≥38°C or 100°F)	Rare
Headache	Prominent	Rare
General aches and pains	Usual, often severe	Rare
Fatigue, weakness	Can be prolonged for a number of weeks	Quite mild
Extreme exhaustion	Early and prominent	Never
Runny nose	Common	Common
Sneezing	Common	Usual
Sore throat	Common	Common
Cough	Common, can be severe	Mild to moderate, hacking cough
Diarrhoea, vomiting	Sometimes	Not associated with the common cold in adults

How does influenza spread?

Flu virus spreads from person to person mainly through the coughing or sneezing of a sick person. Flu virus may also be spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with the virus (for example a tissue or door handle touched by the infected person) and then touches his or her eyes, nose or mouth.

What should I do as a parent?

Two important actions to protect your family

1. Be aware of the symptoms of flu-like illness and know where to seek medical care. See below.
2. Teach your children the following **good health habits** to help stop the spread of germs:
 - Teach your children to cover their mouth and nose with a paper tissue when coughing or sneezing. If no tissue is available they should cough or sneeze into the inside of their elbow. Be sure to set a good example by doing this yourself.
 - Teach your children to use a tissue only once and dispose of it quickly and carefully (a dustbin is fine).
 - Teach your children to wash their hands frequently with soap and water. Be sure to set a good example by doing this yourself. If they do not have access to hand washing facilities give them alcohol hand gel to use.

- Teach your children to avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth.
- Teach your children to stay at least 1 metre/3 feet away from people who are sick.
- Children who are sick should always stay home from the school. If they have influenza they should stay away from the educational institution for 7 days from the onset of symptoms.
- Wash hard surfaces such as kitchen worktops, door handles, etc with a normal household cleaner as the virus can live on these surfaces. Do this frequently.

What should I do if my child gets sick?

If your child gets sick with a flu-like illness as described above you should:

- Keep your child at home and away from others as much as is possible to avoid spreading infection to others. If they are sick with flu they should stay home for 7 days from the onset of symptoms.
- Give your child simple anti-fever medication such as paracetamol or ibuprofen (NB aspirin should NOT be given to children under 16 years of age) and ensure they drink plenty of fluids.
- If you think your child needs to see the GP because they have severe symptoms, remember to ring your GP first.
- If your child is in a high risk group for complications of flu contact your GP, even if their symptoms are mild (High risk groups include people with: chronic lung, heart, kidney, liver, or neurological disease; immunosuppression (whether caused by disease or treatment); diabetes mellitus; people aged 65 years and older; children <2 years; people on medication for asthma, severely obese people (BMI ≥40), pregnant women and people with haemoglobinopathies)
- Teach your child good health habits, as above.
- Ensure that all household surfaces that are touched by hands are kept clean, especially bedside tables, surfaces in bathrooms and kitchens and children's toys. Such surfaces should be wiped regularly with a household disinfectant according to directions on the product label.

Should educational institutions be doing anything to prevent the spread of influenza?

Yes, like parents, educational institutions should encourage and facilitate everyday actions that can help prevent the spread of germs that cause respiratory illnesses like flu including:

- Children should cover their mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. If no tissue is available they should cough or sneeze into the inside of their elbow. Children should use a tissue only once and dispose of it quickly and carefully (a bin is fine). This is known as respiratory etiquette.
- Children should wash their hands frequently with soap and water. Where soap and water is not readily available alcohol based hand gel can be used.
- Children should avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth.

- Wash hard surfaces such as kitchen worktops, door handles, etc frequently with a normal household cleaner as the virus can live on these.

Educational institutions should put up posters on respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene and ensure that children have access to suitable hand washing facilities. Posters can be found on the HPSC website as indicated below.

Is there a vaccine against seasonal influenza?

A vaccine is an injection which prevents a person getting a particular disease. It works by strengthening the body's immune system. The vaccine must be given before the person is infected with the disease.

The flu vaccine for the 2010-2011 influenza season covers the strains of flu that are currently known to be circulating in Ireland, including pandemic (H1N1) 2009 (swine flu) which is the predominant strain of influenza circulating at present. Vaccination is recommended for people at high risk of complications.

Who are the high risk groups that should receive seasonal influenza vaccine?

1. All those 65 years and older.
2. Adults and children over 6 months of age with any of the following: chronic illness requiring regular follow up (e.g. chronic respiratory disease including cystic fibrosis, moderate or severe asthma, chronic heart disease, bronchopulmonary dysplasia, chronic neurological disease, diabetes mellitus, haemoglobinopathies, chronic renal disease, chronic liver disease, chronic neurological disease including multiple sclerosis, hereditary and degenerative disorders of the central nervous system etc).
3. Pregnant women and women up to 6 weeks post birth who are not in a medically at risk group and who have not already received pandemic (H1N1) 2009 vaccine (can be given at any stage of pregnancy). Pregnant women in medical risk groups should receive this year's seasonal influenza vaccine whether or not they received pandemic influenza vaccine.
4. Those who are immunosuppressed due to disease or treatment including those with missing or non-functioning spleens.
5. Children and teenagers on long-term aspirin therapy.
6. Children with any condition (e.g. cognitive dysfunction, spinal cord injury, seizure disorder, or other neuromuscular disorder) that can compromise respiratory function, especially those attending special schools/ day centres.
7. Those with morbid obesity i.e. Body Mass Index ≥ 40 .
8. Residents of nursing homes, old peoples' homes and other long stay facilities.
9. Healthcare staff including those on clinical placement. All pregnant health care workers should be encouraged to get the seasonal flu vaccine (even if they received the pandemic vaccine last year).
10. Carers who have direct patient contact.

Are there medicines to treat influenza?

Yes, there are medicines known as anti-virals that can be used to treat flu. However, as most cases of influenza will be mild, anti-viral treatment will only be necessary in a small proportion of cases. Doctors will assess each case but the following groups are the ones most likely to require treatment with anti-virals:

- Patients who appear to have severe symptoms or
- Patients who are in defined high risk groups as above.

Further information

Posters:

<http://www.ndsc.ie/hpsc/A-Z/Gastroenteric/Handwashing/Posters/>

<http://www.hpsc.ie/hpsc/A->

[Z/Respiratory/Influenza/SeasonalInfluenza/Infectioncontroladvice/File,3599,en.pdf](http://www.hpsc.ie/hpsc/A-Z/Respiratory/Influenza/SeasonalInfluenza/Infectioncontroladvice/File,3599,en.pdf)

Guidance on seasonal influenza:

<http://www.hpsc.ie/hpsc/A-Z/Respiratory/Influenza/SeasonalInfluenza/>