

Newton Public Schools Update for Thursday, May 21, 2009

All Newton Public Schools will be open on Friday.

Members of the Newton Public Schools community have raised many questions about the H1N1 (swine origin) influenza outbreak. To keep you fully informed, this update is provided and will be in a question and answer format. If you have additional questions after you have read this update, please feel free to call the Newton Health & Human Services Department.

Is there flu activity in every school?

There are a small number of cases of influenza-like illness at every school. Oak Hill Middle School is the only Newton Public School with a significant cluster of flu-like illness. Every day, the school nurses and the Newton Health Department closely monitor the number of absent students in every school.

What is the status at Oak Hill Middle School?

The student absentee rate at Oak Hill during the week of 5/11 – 5/15 was 6% - 11%. The absentee rate this week has been 15% – 16% with 90 students out today (5/21/09). The rate of illness has been relatively constant throughout this school week. Because it hasn't changed, and because there are very few teachers and staff who are sick, Oak Hill Middle School will continue to remain open.

How is the decision made to close a school or keep it open?

Each day the number of absent students and staff is tallied and compared to totals from previous days. The number of students dismissed due to illness is followed. As much as possible, the reason for each absence is determined. A consultation with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health epidemiologist takes place each day. The school's ability to function based on the number of absent staff is considered. Additionally, information about school closures in other Massachusetts communities is monitored to determine any trends. Thus far, the circumstances that resulted in closure at other schools are very different than the situation in Newton.

What is being done in all the school buildings to prevent the flu?

Enhanced surveillance and infection control measures have been implemented in all 22 Newton Public School buildings. Students and staff in all schools are being sent home if they display flu-like symptoms. Hand hygiene and cough etiquette are being reinforced and everyone is being instructed to use hand sanitizer and wash their hands frequently. As stated above, the absentee rate is being closely monitored. The most important thing that you can do to help keep the flu from spreading in the community is to keep your sick child at home.

Is there extra cleaning being done because of the flu?

Normal cleaning procedures in the school are being followed. Cleaning frequently touched surfaces like student desks, does little to reduce flu virus transmission because of how easy it is to contaminate them again. Frequent hand washing or using hand sanitizer is the most important step individuals can take to prevent themselves from getting the flu.

What are the symptoms of the flu?

The symptoms of influenza include fever, cough, sore throat, and sometimes body aches, headache, chills and feeling tired. Some people also have diarrhea and vomiting.

Use the following check list to help decide if you or someone in your family may have the flu:

- Yes** **No** Does your child have a cough?
 Yes **No** Does your child have a sore throat?
 Yes **No** Does your child have a headache, body aches or chills?
 Yes **No** Does your child have vomiting or diarrhea?
 Yes **No** **Does your child have a fever of 100 degrees or more?**

For more information about how to take a temperature, there is a "[Fever Fact Sheet](http://www.mass.gov/dph/swineflu)" at www.mass.gov/dph/swineflu.

Should I keep my child at home?

If you checked yes to

- fever of 100 degrees or more **and**
- cough or sore throat

your child has an influenza-like illness. **Keep your child home for 7 days after symptoms start or until your child is completely well for a full day, whichever is longer.**

If you checked "yes" to only one of the questions above, or if your child is ill with other symptoms, keep your child at home at least one day to observe for other symptoms. If other symptoms develop, use the check list questions again to decide whether to continue keep the child home. Send your child back to school after he or she has been completely well for 24 hours.

If your child is absent because of other respiratory illness, a doctor's note indicating your child did not have the flu is required to return to school prior to 7 days. Please continue to respect this protocol to limit the spread of this virus.

What is the exclusion policy for sick students?

If your child is sick with a fever and other flu-like symptoms, he or she should stay home for at least 7 days, or until the symptoms disappear, whichever is longer. We understand that this can be difficult and we are grateful to the parents who have kept their sick children at home. This is a Massachusetts public health guideline and an important way to stop the spread of the virus. This guideline will be strongly enforced.

How can I protect myself from the flu?

You can protect yourself and others from the new H1N1 flu the same way that you protect yourself from seasonal flu. Avoid holding, hugging, kissing, or shaking hands with anyone who has a cold or the flu. Wash your hands often with soap and warm water, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Avoid touching your nose, mouth or eyes. More information about this flu is available here.

http://www.newton.k12.ma.us/documents/swine_flu_fact_sheet.pdf

Who should I call with additional questions?

As always, the school nurses are available to answer questions during the school day. You may also call the Newton Health Department at (617) 796-1420. The state health department established a 24-hour hotline you may reach by calling "211."

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