

Frequently asked questions: Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 (Swine Flu) information for parents

6th October 2009

Version 1.3

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

What is Pandemic (H1N1) 2009?

Influenza A (H1N1) is a type of flu virus. In the past this virus affected pigs, and only occasionally affected people who had close contact with pigs. The virus has now changed and can spread easily from person to person. This Influenza A (H1N1) is now called Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 because people all over the world are being infected by it.

Is Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 dangerous?

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

What are the symptoms of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza?

In most children, the symptoms of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 are similar to the symptoms of regular flu. They 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 Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 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 Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 and the common cold, please see table below.

Symptoms	Pandemic (H1N1) 2009	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 Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 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. This virus is not transmitted by eating pork or pork products.

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 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 educational institution. If they have Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 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 drink plenty of fluids.
- If you think you or your child may have Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 you should call the **HSE Flu Information Line Freephone 1800 94 11 00** or check www.swineflu.ie for advice on what to do next.
- If you think your child needs to see the GP because they have severe symptoms, remember to ring your GP first. Do not visit the surgery unannounced.
- If your child is in a high risk group for complications of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 flu contact your GP, even if their symptoms are mild (High

risk group is 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 <5 years (children <2 years are at higher risk severe complications); people on medication for asthma, severely obese people (BMI ≥ 40), pregnant women and people with haemoglobinopathies)

- Teach your child good health habits, as above.
- It is important to 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 I send my child to their educational institution?

Yes, while educational institutions are open parents should send their children there unless they have any symptoms. It is expected that educational institutions will remain open even if there are some children out sick with Pandemic (H1N1) 2009. However, in certain circumstances an educational institution may be advised to close. This decision will be made in the light of expert advice from the local Department of Public Health who will always have the interests of pupils in mind. We urge parents not to withdraw their children unless given this advice.

Should I send my child to summer camp / Irish College / Language College?

Yes, if the summer camp is open and your child has been well for the past 7 days there is no reason not to send them. However, you should ensure that you will be able to take your child home from the camp if they get sick or should you be advised that students are to go home on public health grounds.

If a child's educational institution is closed what should I do?

You will have to make other arrangements for looking after your children. These alternative arrangements should aim to have as few as possible children being cared for together in any setting. If an educational institution is closed due to Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 it is important, where possible, that gatherings of those children outside of the educational institution do not occur.

Isn't it better for my child to catch this now to develop some immunity in case this comes back more seriously?

Children who have been infected with Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 have generally recovered without complications but some children have had a severe illness. It is preferable to avoid exposure to the virus if possible. When a vaccine is available this will provide safe immunity for children.

What happens when a child in an educational institution is identified as a case of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza?

If a student develops flu-like symptoms at their educational institution, arrangements should be made for him/her to be taken home. The student should not return to their educational institution until 7 days from the onset of symptoms have passed.

In relation to other students no further action needs to be taken. Parents and teachers should, however, be vigilant for the symptoms of flu and, at the first signs of these, the child should stay at home and parents should call the **HSE Flu Information Line Freephone 1800 94 11 00** or check www.swineflu.ie for advice on what to do next.

Why would an educational institution stay open if there are children with Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza?

Educational institution closures and the distribution of antiviral medicines for prevention are not recommended at this time because the virus is spreading in the community generally. People are likely to be repeatedly exposed to the virus in their everyday lives - closing an educational institution will no longer be effective in slowing the spread of the virus as people could still be exposed outside the educational institution.

In some special circumstances educational institution closures might still be recommended.

Should students who have recently returned from travel abroad be kept away from educational institutions?

No. As long as they are well and not suffering from flu-like symptoms, there is no reason for these students to be kept away from their educational institution and they can carry on with their normal routine. Parents should, however, be vigilant for the symptoms of flu and, at the first signs of these, should stay at home and call the **HSE Flu Information Line Freephone 1800 94 11 00** or check www.swineflu.ie for advice on what to do next. If concerned, they should contact their GP or Out-Of-Hours GP service by telephone.

Should educational institutions continue to go on trips?

There is no reason why educational institution should not continue to go on trips both in this country and abroad.

If the trip is abroad we recommend that they look at the latest available travel information, if any, on the Department of Foreign Affairs website (www.dfa.ie) and advice on the Department of Health and Children website <http://www.dohc.ie>

Should educational institutions be doing anything to prevent the spread of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 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 Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 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 rub 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 could 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 www.hpsc.ie – educational and childcare settings.

Should educational institutions continue to run extracurricular or sporting activities?

Yes, educational institutions should continue extracurricular activities as normal. If a class/educational institution is advised to close due to Pandemic (H1N1) 2009, any extracurricular activities that the class/educational institution would normally do should also cease.

Is there a vaccine against human Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 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.

Vaccine companies are manufacturing a vaccine for Pandemic (H1N1) 2009. The Health Service Executive will provide the vaccine to everyone in the country as soon as sufficient amount of vaccines are available. This may commence as early as autumn but it will take many months to vaccinate all people.

Is the seasonal flu vaccine effective against Pandemic (H1N1) 2009?

The current seasonal flu vaccine provides little or no protection against the Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus. However, anyone recommended to get seasonal flu vaccine should get it this year, as well as the Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 vaccine.

Are there medicines to treat Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza?

Yes, there are medicines known as anti-virals that can be used to treat flu due to Pandemic (H1N1) 2009. However, as most cases of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 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

Where to find more information

The most accurate public information on the current situation can be found here:

www.swineflu.ie
www.hse.ie
www.hpsc.ie
www.dohc.ie
www.dfa.ie