

September 25, 2009

Dear Parents:

If you are like most of us, you are hearing all kinds of information these days, some of it alarming, about the H1N1 virus, also known as "swine flu." We thought it important that you know what we know about this situation so that when flu season arrives, as it does every year, you know what to expect from us in Alpena Public Schools and how to best safeguard your family. The best way to deal with any health issue is with information.

Accordingly, this letter is long, but we want you to have as full a picture as possible. We hope you read it through and keep it for future reference. It covers: 1) media hype, the CDC, and the real situation; 2) two kinds of flu and how to tell the difference; 3) two vaccines and where to get them; 4) other important ways to stay healthy; 5) what about closing school? 6) more information.

1. Media hype, the CDC, and the real situation:

The media and the Internet are great for spreading information, but as we all know not all of it is true. Despite the sometimes sensational headlines about the H1N1 virus, we assure you that "panic mode" is not necessary. The National Center for Disease Control (CDC) is the lead agency for flu season information and we in Alpena Public Schools are taking our lead from it as well as the Michigan Department of Community Health and our local District Health Dept. No. 4. The CDC and public health officials are the experts; we rely on them to advise the right course of action. As the CDC issues updates, we'll get the pertinent ones to you through school newsletters, our website ([www.alpenaschools.com](http://www.alpenaschools.com), health link) and the local media.

2. Two kinds of flu and how to tell the difference:

What we call "flu season" here in Michigan is an annual occurrence, starting in late fall and continuing usually through March. Last spring, and this fall, an additional flu virus – the H1N1, or swine flu, virus – is on the scene. People with the usual "seasonal flu" typically have a quick onset of fever (100 degrees or higher), headache, dry cough, sore throat, fatigue, and aching muscles. Most people are sick for 5 to 7 days and then get better. The H1N1 virus is marked by those same symptoms although **additionally, according to the CDC, "vomiting and diarrhea are reported more commonly with H1N1 than is typical for seasonal flu."** If your child is vomiting and/or has diarrhea in combination with the other usual flu symptoms, check with your health care professional.

3. Two vaccines and where to get them:

Right now you may be hearing "flu vaccines available here!" The vaccine out now is for the regular seasonal flu, not the H1N1 virus, and is available to anyone for a fee at the hospital, pharmacies, physicians' offices, and the health department. This vaccine will provide you a degree of protection against various flu viruses out this winter but will not protect against swine flu.

The H1N1, or swine flu, vaccine, will not be out until mid-October and although it is free, its availability will be limited. The H1N1 vaccine will be offered at school sites and physicians' offices, among other places, according to District Health Dept. No. 4, although a process and schedule has not yet been released. Depending on supply of vaccine, everyone who wants the shot may not be able to get it. The CDC has developed a set of "tiers" of people to be vaccinated: Children aged 2-25 come first, because they do not have immunity to the swine flu, are most affected by it, and are considered at highest risk of infection. The latest information from the CDC is that the 2-25 age group will need two H1N1 shots to be vaccinated. **(The Michigan Dept. of Community Health encourages parents to make sure children aged 2-25, and vulnerable adults, get both seasonal and H1N1 vaccines. We note, however, that the vaccines are OPTIONAL, not required, and that no vaccine of either type will be dispensed to anyone under age 18 without a signed parental consent form.)** The second "tier" of people to be vaccinated includes "vulnerable adults" such as pregnant women, people who live with or care for children younger than 6 months of age, health care and emergency services workers, and people aged 26-64 with chronic health conditions. District Health Dept. No. 4 will announce when H1N1 vaccine is available in our community.

4. Other important ways to stay healthy:

You, as parents, can help greatly in curtailing the spread of seasonal and H1N1 flu viruses. Please remember to:

- Teach your children to wash their hands often with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub. You can set a good example by doing this yourself.
- Teach your children not to share personal items such as drinks, food, or unwashed utensils, and to cover their coughs and sneezes with tissues. If a tissue is unavailable, a child should cover up a cough or sneeze by coughing into his elbow, arm, or sleeve rather than hand.
- If you believe your child has the flu, try to keep him or her hydrated and keep his or her fever down but do not use products containing aspirin. Keep your child home for at least 24 hours after he or she no longer has a fever or does not have signs of fever without using fever-reducing drugs. Keeping children with a fever at home will reduce the number of people who may get infected. Besides, sick children are uncomfortable at school and for their own health and safety should be at home. We'll send 'em back if we see that they are ill; please have a "plan B" for someone to stay with them if they are too sick to be in class.

5. What about closing school?

We will be reporting flu incidence and absenteeism to our local health department, but **currently the CDC recommends schools NOT be closed if a case of H1N1 flu is confirmed.** However, as in the past, we consider closing a school with a very high rate of student or staff absenteeism, whether from flu, any other illness, or act of God. We do not anticipate closure, but if it should happen we will of course let parents know as soon as possible.

6. More information:

A great deal of information is out there on seasonal flu, swine flu, and staying healthy. For daily information and updates, check the CDC website ([www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu)), the Michigan Dept. of Community Health website ([www.michigan.gov/flu](http://www.michigan.gov/flu)), District Health Dept. No. 4 ([www.dhd4.org](http://www.dhd4.org)), or call District Health Dept. No. 4 (356-4507) or me, School Nurse Cheryl Lemke (358-5106). You may see conflicting information occasionally on the websites; that's because the situation changes constantly and the revised information doesn't always get immediately relayed.

Again, if you have questions, please call. We are here to help.

Sincerely,

Cheryl Lemke  
Alpena Public Schools Nurse

Brent Holcomb  
Alpena Public Schools Superintendent