

Fact Sheet

Influenza

Recommendations for Schools

FAST FACTS

- Approximately 1/5 of the U.S. population attends or works in schools.
- Nearly 22 million school days are lost annually due to the common cold alone.
- Addressing the spread of germs in schools is essential to the health of our youth, our schools, and our nation.
- Students need to get plenty of sleep and physical activity, drink water, and eat good food to help them stay healthy in the winter and all year.
- Nearly 1/3 of the population is infected with flu every year.

Influenza

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. Influenza is a highly contagious virus that affects mainly the nose, throat, chest, and lungs. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. The best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu vaccination each year.

Symptoms of Influenza

Symptoms of influenza include:

- Fever (typically $\geq 100^{\circ}$ F)
- Headache
- Extreme tiredness
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle aches
- Stomach symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, also can occur but are more common in children than adults

Emergency Warning Signs of Influenza

In **children**, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Fever with a rash

Infectious Period

People may be able to infect each other one day before symptoms occur and up to ten days after being sick.

How can you prevent the flu?

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get vaccinated each year. There are two types of vaccines:

- The “flu” shot- an inactivated vaccine (containing killed virus) that is given with a needle. The flu shot is approved for use in people six months of age and older, including healthy people and people with chronic medical conditions.

About two weeks after vaccination, antibodies develop that protect against influenza virus infection. Flu vaccines will not protect against flu-like illnesses caused by non-influenza viruses.

If you get the flu:

- Stay home from work or school
- Make sure and get plenty of rest and water
- Over-the-counter medications may relieve symptoms
- Consult your doctor

Vaccination

Yearly flu vaccination should begin as soon as vaccine becomes available, usually early in the fall and will provide protection for the entire flu season.

Who should get vaccinated?

Annual vaccination for all persons 6 months and older is recommended.

What should be done to prevent or reduce the spread of influenza in schools?

- **Stay home when ill.** Any employee, student, teacher, or staff suspected of having influenza should not attend school.
- **Wash hands often.** Wash hands several times a day using soap and warm water for 15-20 seconds (this is generally around the time it takes to sing the ABC's). Dry hands with paper towels or automatic hand dryers if possible. In school, allow regular breaks for the students and teachers to wash hands. Young children should be instructed and assisted to ensure proper hand hygiene. Restrooms should be checked regularly to ensure that soap and paper towels are always available.
- **Throw away tissues.** Influenza can be spread from coughs or sneezes. Make sure tissues are available in all classrooms. Students and staff should cover their mouths with their upper arm or a tissue when coughing and use a tissue when sneezing or blowing their noses. Tissues should be thrown away immediately followed by proper hand hygiene.
- **Use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.** Alcohol-based hand gels may be used in classrooms to minimize disruption. Hand sanitizer is effective in killing germs on hands when they are not visibly soiled. Appropriate times to use hand sanitizer are after coughing, sneezing, or contact with infected surfaces (e.g., desk, doorknob).
- **Report absence 10 percent or greater.** Schools with 10 percent or more of their total enrollment absent on a given day due to illness should report this to their local health department and the Iowa Department of Public Health (1-800-362-2736). Reporting outbreaks assists in disease surveillance and understanding the impact of influenza on the community.
- **It is not necessary to cancel school due to influenza cases.** Closure of individual schools in the event of an outbreak has not proven to be an effective way of stopping the spread of influenza but that decision should be made by the appropriate school officials based on other considerations.
- **Avoid close contact.** Schools should be extra-vigilant that ill students be excluded from sports activities, choir or any activities that may involve close contact, since transmission of influenza may be easier in these situations. All students and staff should avoid sharing of saliva, i.e., sharing glasses, water bottles, other drinks, spoons/forks, or kissing, etc.
- **Don't forget about the school bus.** School buses, because of the enclosed space, may allow for easy spread of influenza. Tissues should be available on the buses, and students should be encouraged to cover nose and mouth while coughing or sneezing. Disinfect commonly handled interior surfaces (i.e., door handles, hand rails, etc.) between groups of students, if possible. Consider making alcohol-based hand gel available on buses since hand washing facilities are not available.
- **Clean surfaces frequently.** In the school, clean commonly used surfaces such as door handles, handrails, eating surfaces, desks, etc., frequently with disinfectant (bleach solutions or commercial disinfectants are appropriate).