



Talking to Children About Swine Flu (H1N1): A Parent Resource

Concern over Swine Flu (H1N1) can make children and parents anxious. Although to date very few people in the United States have become sick, there is uncertainty about how far and quickly the virus will spread.

Acknowledging some level of concern, without panicking, is appropriate and can result in people taking actions that reduce the risk of illness. Helping children cope with anxiety regarding the flu requires providing prevention information without causing alarm.

Children look to adults for guidance on how to react to stressful events. If parents seem overly worried, children may panic. Parents should reassure their children that health and school officials are working hard to ensure that people throughout the country stay healthy. However, children also need factual, *age appropriate* information about the potential seriousness of disease risk and concrete instruction about how to avoid infection and spread of the virus. Teaching children positive preventive measures, talking with them about their fears, and giving them a sense of some control over their risk of infection can help reduce anxiety.

Specific Guidelines

Remain calm and reassuring. Your children will react to and follow your verbal and nonverbal reactions. What you say and do about the flu virus and current prevention efforts can either increase or decrease your child's anxiety. If true, emphasize to your children that they and your family are fine. Remind them that you and the adults at their school are there to keep them safe and healthy. Let your children talk about their feelings and help put their concerns into the appropriate perspective.

Make yourself available. Your children may need extra attention from you and may want to talk about their concerns and questions. Make time for them. Tell them you love them and give them plenty of hugs and kisses.

Know the symptoms of Swine Flu and how it spreads. Symptoms of Swine flu include fever, sore throat, and cough. Some people also have a runny nose, fatigue, body aches, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. The virus is transmitted through the coughing or sneezing of people infected with the virus. People may also become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouths or noses. The virus is not spread by eating pork or other foods.

Review basic hygiene practices. Encourage children to practice everyday good hygiene by washing their hands, by covering their mouths with a tissue when they sneeze or cough, and by not sharing food or drinks. These simple steps are very effective at preventing the spread of flu and other illnesses. Giving children guidance on what they can do to prevent infection gives them a greater sense of control over the flu and will help to reduce their anxiety.

Be honest and accurate. In the absence of factual information, children often imagine situations far worse than reality. Don't ignore their concerns, but rather explain that at the present moment the vast majority of people, even those who are sick, will be okay. Nationwide, the number of people who are currently sick is very small. Children can be told that there are many ways to avoid the virus and that doctors can help to treat people who do get sick. Contact your school nurse or pediatrician and/or refer them to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for factual information.

Discuss new rules or practices at school. Many schools will be enforcing prevention habits. This might include more frequent hand washing or use of antibacterial soaps; for older children, schools may temporarily limit activities where students are in close proximity or sharing items. Your school nurse or principal will send information home. Be sure to discuss this with your child. Contact your school nurse with any specific questions.

Avoid excessive blaming. When tensions are high, some people exert excessive energy trying to assign blame. It is important to avoid stereotyping any one group of people as responsible for the virus. Bullying or negative comments made toward another ethnic group should be stopped and reported to the school.

Monitor television viewing. Limit television viewing or access to information on the Internet. Constantly watching updates on the status of the flu virus can increase anxiety. Engage your child in games or other interesting activities instead. Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children.

Maintain a normal routine to the extent possible. Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promotes physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities, but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

Communicate with your school. Let your school know if your child is sick, and keep them home. Talk to your school nurse, school psychologist, school counselor, or school social worker if your child is having difficulties as a result of anxiety or stress related to the flu. They can give guidance and support to your child at school. **Follow all instructions from your school.**

Take Time to Talk

You know your children best. Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. However, don't avoid giving them the information that health experts identify as critical to ensuring your children's health. Be patient; children and youth do not always talk about their concerns readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. It is very typical for younger children to ask a few questions, return to playing, then come back to ask more questions.

Keep Explanations Age Appropriate

- **Early elementary school** children need brief, simple information that should balance Swine Flu facts with appropriate reassurances that their schools and homes are safe and that adults are there to help keep them healthy and to take care of them if they do get sick. Give simple examples of the steps people take every day to stop germs, such as washing hands.
- **Upper elementary and early middle school** children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what will happen if the Swine Flu comes to their school or community. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to prevent germs from spreading.
- **Upper middle school and high school** students are able to discuss the issue in a more in-depth (adult-like) fashion and can be referred directly to appropriate sources of Swine Flu facts (e.g., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Provide honest, accurate, and factual information about the current status of the Swine Flu. Having such knowledge can help them feel a sense of control.

Suggested Points to Emphasize When Talking to Children

- At the present time very, very few people are sick with the flu virus in this country. School and health officials are being especially careful to make sure as few people as possible get sick.
- There are things we can do to stay healthy and avoid spreading disease, such as washing our hands, covering our mouths with a tissue when we sneeze or cough, and staying home when we don't feel well.
- Adults at home and school are taking care of your health and safety. If you have concerns, please talk to an adult you trust.
- It is important that all students treat each other with respect and not jump to conclusions about who may or may not have the flu.

For Further Information Visit:

- The National Association of School Psychologists: www.nasponline.org
- The National Association of School Nurses: www.nasn.org
- The National Parent Teacher Association: www.pta.org

Federal Resources:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: http://www.cdc.gov/swineflu/key_facts.htm
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: <http://www.hhs.gov/>
- U.S. Department of Education: <http://www.ed.gov>

May 1, 2009