



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
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Dear Parents and Guardians:

As you probably know, there are different strains of flu affecting Massachusetts, including the new H1N1 strain ("swine flu"). So far, the symptoms of the new H1N1 flu are similar to those of seasonal flu. But *any* flu virus can cause serious illness, so we are working very closely with local and state school officials to try to prevent the spread of the flu among students and staff.

Although virtually all schools are still open, a number of schools have been closed for 7 days because of very high rates of absence. We hope that these temporary closures will help prevent new infections and avoid unnecessary illness. Even if your child's school hasn't closed, think about how you would manage child care issues if closure were necessary. If your school does close, it is very important that you do not let your children get together with friends, relatives or other people — whether in the community or at home.

Regardless of whether or not a school has students with the flu, there are steps every parent can take to lower their children's chances of getting sick. Teach them to wash their hands often with soap and water. Children don't always have easy access to a sink, so you might consider giving them a small bottle of hand sanitizer for their backpack. They can use it throughout the day, and before snack time and lunch.

In addition, there are things each of us can do to prevent the spread of flu. First, teach your children to cough into their inner elbow or into a tissue, instead of their hands. This will help prevent the spread of germs, including the flu virus. Second, make sure that your child does not have signs of the flu (a fever with any of the following- cough, sore throat, or runny nose) before you send them to school each morning. And third, if your child has signs of the flu, **please keep them at home for 7 days after their symptoms start, or 24 hours after their symptoms go away — whichever is longer.**

When your child is well again, and has stayed home according to the guidance above, they do not need to be tested for the flu before returning to school.

Most people who get the flu do not need to seek medical care and do not need to be tested for H1N1 flu. However, certain people may be at increased risk for complications from the flu. If

they have been in contact with someone with the flu, the following individuals, or their guardians, should talk with a doctor. They include:

- People over 65 or under 2 years of age
- People with chronic lung, heart, kidney, liver or blood disorders
- People with immune systems that are compromised (either due to illness or medicines)
- Pregnant women
- Children less than 18 years old who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy who might be at risk for experiencing Reye's syndrome after influenza virus infection

Additionally, for those parents concerned about the possible impact of the H1N1 outbreak on your child's educational requirements, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education recently issued guidelines that address the possible delay of MCAS testing due to illness or school closures.

We appreciate your continued cooperation and support as we work together to reduce the spread of the flu in our communities.

Sincerely,

John Auerbach
Commissioner