Public Health Agency

October 2012

INFLUENZA – INFORMATION FOR PRINCIPALS

Flu infects people every winter but it is not possible to predict how severe the flu season will be, or what strains will be circulating, in advance. Last year was a mild season after two severe ones.

The vast majority of people, including children, will recover from all strains of flu after a few days of an unpleasant illness. If people with flu-like symptoms are not recovering as expected, especially if they are short of breath or have a productive cough, they should speak to their GP.

People who have an at-risk condition should be vaccinated; if they develop flu they should speak to their GP as they may be prescribed antivirals. The flu vaccine this year will protect against H1N1 2009 (often called swine flu) another common flu A strain (H3N2), and a flu B strain.

If people are in contact with flu and have an at-risk medical condition they may also wish to speak to their GP about preventative antivirals; however it should be remembered that as flu is widespread in the community it is impossible to avoid contact with flu viruses.

What are the symptoms of flu?

The symptoms of flu often start suddenly and include:

- fever
- fatigue
- pains in the limbs or the joints
- coughing
- sore throat
- headache
- runny nose
- vomiting and diarrhoea (in some people).

Advice for schools

Should a child develop flu-like symptoms at school, arrangements should be made for them to be taken home as soon as possible. They should stay off school until completely recovered.

While waiting, they should be placed in a suitable area, such as a medical room or a small office (to reduce the chance of spreading the infection to other children) where they can be kept under observation.

Parents should take their child straight home and, if necessary, telephone their GP or GP out-of-hours service.

If a child develops flu-like symptoms at home, they should be kept away from school until they recover and parents should, if necessary, seek medical advice.

Staff with flu-like symptoms should also stay at home until recovered.

As flu will be circulating widely in the general community as well as in schoolchildren, there is no benefit expected from closing schools.

Good hygiene advice

Schools, and parents, can help reduce the spread of all viruses by encouraging good personal hygiene among children:

1. Washing hands frequently with soap and water to reduce the spread of virus from their hands to face or to others;
2. Covering nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing and to use a tissue when possible;
3. Disposing of used tissues quickly and carefully;
4. Cleaning hard surfaces (eg door handles) frequently using a normal cleaning product.

Schools have been advised by the Education and Library Boards and Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) to ensure that adequate supplies of liquid soap, hot and cold water, and paper towels or hot air dryers are available for pupils and staff. It is not necessary for schools to provide hand sanitisers; however, should they wish to do so, it is important to note that they are not a substitute for good hand washing facilities.

Further advice

An advice sheet for parents and guardians is attached. This and other information is available at http://www.fluawareni.info

Further advice can be sought from your ELB Health and Safety Officer, who may wish to seek further advice from the Public Health Agency.