

Prevention Is Still the Best Strategy

By

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As more than 40,000 Marin County students return to their classes this week, Marin Health and Human Services, the Marin County Office of Education and the public and private schools of Marin County are partnering to decrease the spread of pandemic H1N1 and seasonal flu, and minimize disruption of day-to-day social, educational, and economic activities.

Because the novel H1N1 flu strain will be circulating along with the usual seasonal strains this fall and winter, Public Health officials at the national, state and local levels are concerned that there will be a greater than usual number of illnesses. Although H1N1 has generally caused mild illness so far, many of the cases have occurred among young people.

Last week, the Centers for Disease Control released new guidelines about flu prevention strategies for schools which have been shared along with information, guidance and support for school staff, parents and students in Marin County.

Along with hand washing and respiratory hygiene practices, vaccination is the most effective tool to control the spread of flu. Clinical trials are underway to establish that the new H1N1 vaccine is effective and safe. Initial shipments should become available in mid October, continuing through December. The vaccine will require two doses, three weeks apart. It will be given in addition to the vaccine for seasonal flu. Planning for distribution and administering of the H1N1 vaccine is underway, and will include health care providers, clinics, other locations where flu shots are usually given, and possibly, school based clinics. Based on CDC recommendations, early doses of vaccine will be made available to those at greatest risk of complications from H1N1, including pregnant women, household contacts and caregivers for children under six months of age, healthcare and emergency medical services personnel, young people six months to 24 years old, and persons 25 through 64 years with health conditions associated with risk of complications from flu.

Simple precautions practiced by adults and children will help slow and prevent the spread of both the new H1N1 virus and seasonal flu:

- Wash hands often with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleanser.
- Teach your children not to share personal items like drinks, food or unwanted utensils.

- Cover coughs and sneezes with tissues or with your sleeve or elbow if no tissue is available.
- Know the signs and symptoms of flu—fever (100 degrees or higher), cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headaches and feeling very tired. Some people vomit or experience diarrhea.
- Sick children or adults should remain at home for at least 24 hours after they no longer have fever or do not show signs of a fever, without using fever-reducing medications.

While school dismissals are not anticipated at this time, CDC guidance offers strategies that may be utilized in consultation between Marin public health authorities, the Marin County Superintendent of Schools and local school districts, if H1N1 becomes more severe:

- Conducting active fever and flu symptom screening of students and staff as they arrive at school
- Making changes to increase space between people such as moving desks farther apart and postponing field trips
- Increasing periods for students and staff to remain at home if they suffer flu-like symptoms to at least 7 days
- Dismissing schools if the situation becomes serious enough that the Public Health Officer and school officials authorize such actions

Marin Health and Human Services will work closely with the Marin County Office of Education to make the latest information available to school districts, parents and the community. Updated information can be found at www.marinflu.org and www.marinschools.org.

A Flu Prevention Information parent meeting will be held on Wednesday, September 30, 2009 at 7:00 p.m. at the Marin County Office of Education, 1111 Las Gallinas, San Rafael, CA 94903 including steps being taken by Public Health and the schools, parents' role in prevention and treatment, outlook for the flu season, and vaccination availability. Translation services will be available in Spanish.

Our goal is to keep our Marin County community a safe and healthy environment for our children, families and all other residents.

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