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Respiratory Outbreak Information for Schools

With flu season upon us, the New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) would like to remind the school community what they should expect to experience regarding respiratory illness among students and staff. Influenza (flu) can cause mild to severe illness. Young children, older people and people with certain health conditions are among the people who are at high risk of serious flu complications. Serious outcomes of flu infection can result in hospitalizations or sometimes death. NJDOH receives numerous outbreak reports which have generated questions from school and local health departments on reporting requirements. Below are answers to some of the most common questions we have received regarding outbreak reports, as well as links to valuable resources schools can use.

What should schools expect to see during widespread flu activity?

With widespread influenza activity, typically seen schools should expect to experience increased absenteeism among students and staff with respiratory symptoms. NJDOH recommends that schools continue to monitor students and staff for sudden fever and respiratory illness symptoms.

What should schools do about increased absenteeism for influenza like illness (ILI)?

NJDOH recommends that schools and childcare settings monitor attendees for sudden fever and respiratory illness symptoms. School or childcare attendees and staff with sudden fever and respiratory illness symptoms should be sent home with instructions to stay at home until fever free for 24 hours without fever reducing medication. Instructions should be given to seek medical care with worsening of symptoms.

How does a school know if a respiratory outbreak is occurring?

Often in the school setting, it is difficult to determine if an outbreak exists. An outbreak may be occurring if you are experiencing clusters of ill students and/or staff that are in the same classroom, same grade or wing of the facility or have attended a common event. If you think an outbreak may be occurring, contact your [local health department](#) for guidance. During flu season we would expect a school to experience cases of flu or ILI. Unless you are experiencing clusters as described above and in the [NJDOH General Guidelines for the Control of Outbreaks in School and Child Care Settings](#), it is not necessary to contact public health.

What should a school do if they are experiencing an outbreak of ILI?

If you suspect an outbreak is occurring, the school should report the outbreak to the local health department to ensure that public health recommendations are implemented. Some control measures that a school will be asked to implement include:

- Isolating ill students/staff from well students/staff until they can be sent home.
- Increasing frequency of cleaning of common areas and frequently touched surfaces.
- Encouraging frequent hand hygiene.
- Reinforcing respiratory etiquette to students and staff.

What preventative measures should a school take?

NJDOH recommends that schools and childcare setting increase education on respiratory hygiene. Staff and children (as developmentally appropriate) should all be taught and asked to follow these steps that prevent the transmission of infections such as influenza:

- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue or into your sleeve, not your hands.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Wash hands frequently, especially after coughing or sneezing.
- Stay home if you're sick, especially with a fever.

Additional preventative measures include:

- Routine cleaning and disinfecting of frequently touched surfaces and objects that may be contaminated with germs like flu.
- Have an adequate supply of tissues, soap, paper towels, alcohol-based hand rubs and disposable wipes.
- Adhere to exclusion recommendations from public health. For ILI; fever free for 24 hours without fever reducing medication. Doctors notes for return do not supersede public health recommendation.

When should a school close for outbreaks?

Although school dismissal and closure are not recommended for the control of seasonal flu, schools should work with state and local health officials to determine if and when you should dismiss students based on the severity of disease in your school community. Some schools may decide to close based on local considerations, such as high student and staff absenteeism. If this is the case, schools should consult public health and school district medical personnel before closing. Schools should update emergency plans, so they are in place before an outbreak occurs.

The New Jersey Department of Health asks that everyone take steps to prevent the flu:

- Get a flu shot – it's not too late to be protected!
- Wash hands often.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with your sleeve or a tissue.
- Avoid sick people.
- Stay home if sick. Keep students home if they are sick too.

School outbreak guidance and exclusion information can be found at <https://www.nj.gov/health/cd/topics/schoolhealth.shtml>. For information about flu, go to the New Jersey Department of Health flu website at <http://nj.gov/health/cd/topics/flu.shtml>.