



Influenza Season 2011 Guidelines for Schools: What to Do and Why

Updated February 2011: Influenza activity is very high in Louisiana. Flu season typically peaks in January or February and can last until April or May. Watch for regular updates at www.FighttheFluLA.com or www.dhh.louisiana.gov.

It's not too late to vaccinate!

Influenza vaccine remains readily available at healthcare providers, pharmacies, parish health units, school health clinics, Federally-Qualified Health Centers and Rural Health Clinics.

Influenza 101: The more you understand influenza, the better prepared you will be.

Suspect Influenza Signs & Symptoms

A fever higher than 100 degrees F (37.8 degrees C), accompanied by cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills and/or fatigue.

Teachers and other staff need to identify those with suspected cases of influenza to keep sick people out of schools and classrooms, preventing the spread of infection. Not all seasonal illnesses are flu, though – students who have a simple runny nose, but no fever do not necessarily have influenza.

Sick Coughers, Singers, Talkers and Sneezers Spread Influenza

Those who are ill can spread the flu to others. When people speak, sing, sneeze or cough, they put out thousands of droplets full of flu virus. If these droplets hit healthy people, those people will get infected and become sick within a day or two.

Stay Away from Sick People (three to six feet)

Flu droplets do not travel very far; usually three feet, but not more than six feet. Try to maintain distance from people who are sneezing or coughing.

People Who Have the Flu are Still Contagious Until One Day After Severe Symptoms go Away

Sick people carry the flu virus in their respiratory tracts from the very beginning of their infections to a day after they recover (meaning fever is gone).

The Flu Virus Does Survive Outside the Body and Can Still Make People Sick

When flu virus droplets land on someone's hands, clothes, furniture, food, or any other surface, these droplets remain infectious for a long time. People who touch these surfaces can pick up the virus, transmit it through their hands and spread the illness.

Masks May Be Useful if Used Correctly

- ▶ Wear masks if you are sick and come within three to six feet of others.
- ▶ A wet mask doesn't work. Throw masks away if they become wet.
- ▶ A mask will trap viruses, so remember to throw a used mask away in the trash and wash hands thoroughly after using one.
- ▶ Simple (surgical) disposable masks are effective in preventing sick people from spreading flu viruses and protecting healthy people in close contact (between three to six feet) with sick people.
- ▶ Most people do not like to wear masks and most people do not keep masks around. For these and several other reasons, masks are not often used during flu season.

There is No Easy Way to Confirm Someone has the Flu

Doctors treat people who have typical signs and symptoms of influenza (see above left) as if they have influenza.

- ▶ There are many other germs (viruses and bacteria) that cause a flu-like illness. These germs are also very common during influenza season.

- ▶ Confirming that someone has influenza is very expensive and these tests take several days. Doctors cannot wait that long to treat sick patients, so testing is not necessary for treatment and prevention. People should still take measures to avoid becoming ill.

Most Influenza is Mild, but Some Cases May Be Severe

Most people who catch the flu are only sick for a few days and have mild symptoms, which they can treat at home with bed rest and over-the-counter medication (e.g. pain relievers, fever reducers).

People who have chronic illnesses or conditions, women who are pregnant, people older than 65 and very young children can experience more severe cases of the flu. People in these groups who develop flu symptoms should contact a doctor to see if they need special treatment or prescription medications.

Healthy People Who Catch the Flu Will Have a Mild Illness

Try to stay in good general health to reduce your risk of severe flu:

- ▶ Get plenty of sleep
- ▶ Be physically active/exercise regularly
- ▶ Manage your stress
- ▶ Drink plenty of fluids
- ▶ Eat nutritious food

Recognize Students Who Have a Higher Risk for Flu Complications

Students at a higher risk of complications from flu include

- ▶ Children younger than five years old; and
- ▶ Children who have chronic diseases such as asthma, heart conditions, kidney, liver, nerve or blood disease, diabetes, or any other illness that causes weakened immunity

Check with the school nurse to identify students who may be at a higher risk.

Antiviral Drugs are not Magic Bullets

These medications are only for people who are at risk for severe complications, have chronic illnesses or are hospitalized.

- ▶ Using antivirals to treat the flu is not as effective as using antibiotics to treat bacterial infections.
- ▶ Antivirals only work if given within 24 to 48 hours of illness onset.

- ▶ Antivirals do not actually cure the flu; they only shorten the length of the illness and prevent further complications.
- ▶ Like antibiotics, if people use antivirals too much, they will develop resistance, and these drugs will become ineffective.

The Best Prevention is to get the Flu Vaccine

When the seasonal flu vaccine becomes available (in late fall for most health care providers), it is the best tool to prevent illness. Students, teachers, parents and others should contact their health care providers about getting the seasonal flu vaccine.

There is no Easy Way to Prevent Influenza Spread in Schools

Teachers, parents and students need to work together in using good hygiene habits to reduce the spread of influenza.

Stay Home When Sick

- ▶ Sick people should stay home until one day after acute symptoms (fever, cough, sore throat) are gone.

Sick people spread the illness to others, so it's important to stay home while contagious. Most people are only sick for a few days, so they do not miss very much work/school time.

Separate Ill Students or Staff from Healthy People

- ▶ Send sick students or staff to a separate room until they are able to go home. If sick people need to stay at school during lunch time, have them eat lunch in a separate area or eat after healthy students and staff have eaten.
- ▶ While a sick child is at school waiting to go home, have him or her wear a protective mask.
- ▶ Staff who supervise sick students should stay three to six feet away to prevent spread of germs.

Those who are sick spread the flu to others, so it's important to separate sick people from well people as soon as possible.

Do Not Require a Physician's Note Before Readmitting a Recovered Child to School

During flu season, doctors' offices, urgent care centers and emergency departments are very busy, and do not have a lot of time to spare for verifying a child's recovery. If children no longer have fever or other severe symptoms, they can return to school.

Teach and Promote Cough Etiquette

- ▶ Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze using a sleeve or a tissue, **NOT your hands**.

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- ▶ Dispose of used tissues immediately, and wash your hands thoroughly afterward.
- ▶ Try to stand at least three to six feet away from others when you cough or sneeze.

Teach and Promote Good Hand Hygiene

- ▶ Wash hands thoroughly, scrubbing for at least 30 seconds using soap and hot water, when hands are soiled.
- ▶ Use hand sanitizer gel.
- ▶ Avoid touching your eyes, mouth and nose as this can spread germs from your hands to other parts of your body.

Routine Cleaning is Important

- ▶ Areas teachers and students usually touch should be cleaned frequently. These include tables, desks, doorknobs, keyboards, bathroom surfaces, countertops and toys.
- ▶ Use household cleaners/disinfectants to clean these areas.
- ▶ The flu virus can live on surfaces for days.
- ▶ Flu virus is easily killed by common household cleaning products.
- ▶ Closing the school for a complete disinfection is not effective because as soon as the school reopens, sick people will return and spread the flu virus, re-infecting surfaces.
- ▶ Health officials recommend routine cleaning as a more effective method of preventing infection spread.

Closing Schools is Not an Effective Solution

- ▶ The flu virus spreads among members of a community over several weeks. To be effective, a school closure would need to last for many weeks or even months.
- ▶ Students and teachers tend to gather outside of school and will still expose each other to germs.
- ▶ Promoting good hygiene and encouraging sick people to leave school and return only when their symptoms

are gone is a more effective method of preventing the spread of flu than closing the school entirely.

But, Some School Closures Can Be Useful

- ▶ Schools where most students are at a higher risk for severe flu may be closed to allow for medical evaluation of students.
- ▶ No effective teaching can take place in a school where many students are absent.
- ▶ Decisions about whether to close schools should be made on a case-by-case basis, considering:
 1. How long and severe a flu outbreak is among people at that particular school;
 2. Students' medical risk; and
 3. Impact on learning/teaching.

Increase Distance Between People at School to Prevent Spreading the Flu

- ▶ Rotate teachers among classrooms instead of having the students move from room to room.
- ▶ Cancel any classes or activities that bring students from multiple classrooms together.
- ▶ Hold classes outdoors when possible.
- ▶ Move students' desks farther apart.
- ▶ Divide classes into smaller groups so students are exposed to fewer people.
- ▶ Encourage students to practice good hygiene and keep distance from others when they ride the bus or use other forms of public transportation.
- ▶ Move classes to larger rooms when possible to allow more space between students.
- ▶ Postpone field trips or other activities that bring students to other locations where they interact in large groups.