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School zone: Revised guidance for school closures in Snohomish County
Snohomish Health District moves to no-close policy for apparently mild influenza A/H1N1

SNOHOMISH COUNTY, Wash. -- Effective May 4, 2009, Snohomish Health District revised recommendations for school closures related to student and staff illness with A/H1N1. The local public health agency now advises schools to step up their screening for ill students and staff, but to remain open when isolated cases of illness are detected in the school population.

"Our understanding about how this virus spreads has changed," said Dr. Gary Goldbaum, Health Officer and Director of Snohomish Health District. "We know this influenza illness is spreading rapidly and widely in our community, and that it largely is a mild illness similar to 'routine' seasonal flu. Many people may have this flu right now, and do not know it.

"For these reasons, it no longer makes sense to close schools based on isolated cases. Public health officials across the state have agreed that we must continue to monitor the situation closely and to learn more about the severity of this illness -- but to respond prudently and practically," said Dr. Goldbaum.

He cautioned that local public health may need to recommend closing schools if there is evidence that illness is spreading rapidly through a school. He said that our county is still in the early stages of this outbreak, and the situation may change.

Current federal guidance about school closures allow local public health authorities to base decisions on the local situation.

Snohomish Health District is maintaining close contact with all of the school districts in the county. Dr. Goldbaum is in direct contact with the superintendents of the schools in which we have probable cases of A/H1N1.

"We appreciate the collaboration of parents, students, and school officials during this early stage of the outbreak," said Dr. Goldbaum. "The excellent communication between Snohomish Health District and the school districts made all the difference in easing school family concerns. We applaud the schools for getting good information out to their school families in timely fashion."

New Recommendations to Decrease Influenza A/H1N1 in Snohomish County Schools

- ✓ Each morning, all parents or caregivers should assess all family members and especially all school-age children for symptoms of influenza (fever and cough or sore throat cough) or other symptoms that might be influenza.
- ✓ Each morning all school staff should assess themselves for symptoms of influenza.
- ✓ If a child or adult is ill with other symptoms, they should stay home at least one day to observe how the illness develops and until completely well for 24 hours.
- ✓ Schools should screen students and staff for visible signs of possible influenza illness upon arrival at school.
- ✓ Students and staff who appear ill at arrival or become ill at school should be promptly isolated and sent home.
- ✓ Persons who are ill should stay home and not go into the community unless they need medical care. Ill students should not attend alternative child care.
- ✓ Situations are unique and school authorities may close school at their discretion. Parents may use their judgment regarding the risk and benefits of sending their children to school during this influenza outbreak as they would during a seasonal influenza outbreak.
- ✓ Schools will no longer be routinely ordered closed by Snohomish Health District on the basis of a diagnosis of suspected or confirmed cases of influenza A/H1N1. As is our practice with seasonal influenza, schools **may** be closed if larger numbers of students or faculty become ill and school functioning becomes disrupted.

Snohomish Health District will continue to monitor information locally and nationally.

Celebrating our 50th year of service in 2009, the Snohomish Health District works for a safer and healthier community through disease prevention, health promotion, and protection from environmental threats. Find more information about the Health District at www.snohd.org. **###END###**

MORE...

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Useful resources

OSPI

<http://www.k12.wa.us/>

School pandemic planning checklists

<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/school/index.html>

Control of Pandemic Flu Virus on Environmental Surfaces in Homes and Public Places

<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/individual/panfacts.html>

Snohomish Health District

www.snohd.org