

From the Office of the Director of Public Health  
Trust Headquarters  
Penrith Hospital  
Penrith  
Cumbria  
CA11 8HX  
Tel: 01768 245490  
Direct Fax: 01768 245318  
John.ashton@cumbriapct.nhs.uk

Date: 10 September 2009

Dear Parent / Guardian,

We are taking this opportunity at the beginning of the school term to write to all parents and guardians to give you information about the current swine flu situation in Cumbria. This letter will explain what swine flu is, what the situation is so far, what the NHS is doing and what schools and parents can do to help care for their children and others. This letter also gives contact numbers and how to obtain further information and details of websites.

### **What swine flu is**

Swine flu is the common name given to a new strain of influenza. It is called swine flu because it is thought to have originated in pigs, but this is not certain.

The most common symptoms are a temperature of 38°C or more, sore throat, diarrhoea, headache, feeling generally unwell and a dry cough. In other words, the symptoms are very similar to seasonal (regular) flu. Most people recover within a week, even without special treatment. The virus was first identified in Mexico in April 2009. It has since become a pandemic, which means it has spread around the globe. It has spread quickly because it is a new type of flu virus that few, if any, people have full resistance to.

The temperature symptom is important: if your child does not have a temperature of 38°C or more they will almost certainly not have swine flu.

Flu pandemics are a natural event that occur from time to time. Last century, there were flu pandemics in 1918, 1957 and 1968.

In most cases the virus has proved relatively mild. However, it is not yet clear how big a risk the virus is. For this reason, and because all viruses can mutate to become more potent, we must prepare for the most serious prospect whilst not necessarily expecting it. There is now a new self-care service, called the National Pandemic Flu Service, which allows people to check their condition online [www.direct.gov.uk/pandemicflu](http://www.direct.gov.uk/pandemicflu) or over the telephone (0800 151 3100 or text phone 0800 151 3200) and obtain antiviral medication if swine flu is confirmed.

However, the following people should call their GP directly for an assessment of their symptoms and a diagnosis:

- those with a serious existing illness, such as cancer
- pregnant women,
- those who have a sick child under one,
- those with a condition that suddenly becomes much worse, or
- those with a condition that is still becoming worse after seven days (five for a child).

All children can use the Flu Service. However, those with poor English or who are too young should be supported by an adult or have an adult phone on their behalf.

The antiviral medications oseltamavir (Tamiflu) and zanamivir (Relenza) are being used throughout the UK to treat people with swine flu. Antivirals are not a cure for swine flu, but will help to:

- reduce the length of time you are ill by around one day,
- relieve some of the symptoms, and
- reduce the potential for serious complications such as pneumonia.

These medications are not without side effects and it is important that they are used only if people are really poorly.

If you ring the National Pandemic Flu Service number and you or your child are diagnosed as having swine flu, you will be given a unique access number and told where your nearest antiviral collection point is. Your '**flu friend**' – a friend or relative who does not have swine flu – can use this number to pick up your antivirals from the local collection point for you. Your flu friend must show their own ID as well as yours. Acceptable forms of ID include:

- a utility bill
- passport
- a credit or debit card
- driving licence
- NHS card

Scientists have now developed a vaccine for swine flu, but it isn't available just yet. The first batches of vaccine are expected to be available in October/November, and 30 million double doses (enough for half the population) are expected by the end of the year. The government has ordered enough vaccine for the whole population which will become available in the coming months. Vaccination will focus on those at the greatest risk first. The vaccine will initially be given to the following groups, in this order:

- **People aged between six months and 65 years who usually have the seasonal flu jab.**
- **Pregnant women, subject to licensing.** The European Medicines Agency, who license the vaccine, will indicate whether it can be given to all pregnant women or whether it should only be offered at certain stages of pregnancy.
- **People who live with those whose immune systems are compromised,** such as cancer patients or people with HIV/AIDS.

- **People aged 65 and over who usually have the seasonal flu jab.**

It is important that schools and parents continue to do everything they can to stop the virus from spreading

The most important way is to have good respiratory and hand hygiene.

To reduce the risk of catching or spreading the virus you should:

- cover your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing, using a tissue
- throw the tissue away quickly and carefully – in a bin!
- wash your hands regularly with soap and water
- clean hard surfaces (such as door handles and remote controls) frequently with a normal cleaning product

One other thing you can do now is to make sure you have a digital thermometer to take your child's temperature. Call your GP immediately if your child has any of the following symptoms AND a temperature of 38°C or more:

- tiredness,
- headache,
- runny nose and sneezing,
- sore throat,
- shortness of breath,
- loss of appetite, [www.pandemicflu.direct.gov.uk](http://www.pandemicflu.direct.gov.uk)
- vomiting and diarrhoea, or
- aching muscles, limb and joint pain.

Of course, if you're worried about your child you should always call your GP for advice.

Have a thermometer and enough cold and cough remedies in your medicine cupboard, in case you or your family develops swine flu.

You can also make the preparations now by confirming a network of friends, relatives or other parents who could help you if you or your child fall ill to give your family some help in keeping everyday life on track and so that you will be able to plan to for the support your family may need

### **Other sources of information**

You can find out more information from the sources below

- Health Protection Agency [www.hpa.org](http://www.hpa.org)
- NHS Cumbria [www.cumbria.nhs.uk](http://www.cumbria.nhs.uk)
- NHS Direct [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

A Question and Answer sheet for young people has been devised which was sent to the County Council and distributed to the childcare settings along with a Health Protection Agency leaflet aimed at getting the message across to children about the importance of good hygiene and hand washing .

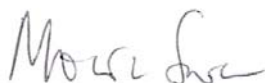
Question and Answer sheet is available online:

[www.teachernet.gov.uk/educationoverview/flupandemic/flupandemicqanda/parents/](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/educationoverview/flupandemic/flupandemicqanda/parents/)

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John R Ashton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Professor John R Ashton CBE  
Director of Public Health and County Medical Officer

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Moira Swann". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Moira Swann  
Corporate Director Children's Services

**Together we can achieve the best for every child, young person and their family in Cumbria.**