

Update on H1N1 Flu (Swine Flu) from Wakefield Health Department June 15, 2009:

The World Health Organization (WHO) raised the worldwide pandemic alert level to Phase 6, which means that a global pandemic is underway. The WHO's declaration was expected given that novel H1N1 Flu (Swine Flu) has spread rapidly throughout the world including here in Massachusetts. It is important to note that the WHO pandemic phases are based on the geographical spread of novel influenza virus, NOT the severity of the illness. The WHO declaration does not change how we are currently dealing with the outbreak here. State and local agencies have taken this outbreak very seriously from the beginning and have been on a heightened state of alert since the first case was identified in the United States.

Federal, state and local authorities have been preparing for a pandemic for many years and will continue to direct and adjust our response as needed based on what we are seeing here in Massachusetts and elsewhere.

This declaration of Phase 6 serves as a reminder not only for government, but for businesses, communities and individuals as well, to take steps to be prepared. Information is available on the Department of Public Health H1N1 web page.

In Massachusetts, person-to-person spread of H1N1 Flu continues and the level of flu actually in our state is much higher than normally seen at this time of year. The Center for Disease Control reports that H1N1 has now spread to every state in the nation. Likewise, every county in Massachusetts has seen confirmed cases of H1N1 Flu. The new strain of virus is the predominant strain of flu that is circulating at this time and is the likely cause of an increase in visits to health care providers which has been indicated in our routine influenza-like-illness (ILI) surveillance system.

Although school systems, particularly in Eastern Massachusetts, continue to feel the brunt of the H1N1 outbreak with increased absenteeism of students and staff, the Wakefield Schools have only been slightly affected and not enough to fit criteria needed to consider closing any of our schools. Continued communication with the Superintendent of Schools office and the school nurses keeps everyone up-to-date.

Flu outbreaks evolve in unpredictable ways: it is impossible to know if the outbreak will decrease, increase, stay the same or grow in coming weeks and whether the severity of the illness will remain at the same level, which on the whole has been relatively mild for most people.

As we head into the summer month's local, state and federal authorities will remain diligent in tracking this novel H1N1 Flu and therefore remind the public to continue to take simple steps to keep themselves and others healthy:

- Wash you hands frequently with soap and warm water or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- Cover your cough with a tissue or cough into your inner elbow, not your hands
- If you are sick stay home from work and if your child is sick keep him/her home for seven (7) days or 24 hours after symptoms go away – which ever is longer
- Stay informed about the latest developments on the H1N1 Flu

Remember most people who develop the flu and flu-like symptoms do not need to be tested or even seen by a physician. They just need to treat the symptoms: stay home, get plenty of rest, and take over-the-counter medication for fever-aches and pains.

Anyone in a high risk group who has a fever along with a cough, sore throat and runny nose should contact their physician to talk about treatment with antivirals. These work best if taken within two (2) days of when symptoms begin, so even people with mild illness should contact their physician if they have any of the following:

- Children less than two (2) years old
- 65 years or older
- Pregnant women
- People with chronic health problems
- Children and teens on long-term aspirin therapy who might be at risk for experiencing Reye's Syndrome after influenza infection
- Children and adults with compromised immune systems

Although novel H1N1 Flu is not as prominent on page 1 on the newspaper, it is still here and local and state officials are keeping a close eye on it.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to call the Wakefield Board of Health at 781-246-6375 or check the Massachusetts Department of Public Health website www.mass.gov/dph/swineflu or the Center for Disease Control website www.cdc.gov/h1n1/.