



## MESSAGE TO NORTH EAST SCHOOLS FROM PUBLIC HEALTH ENGLAND

Over the past two weeks, the North East Health Protection Team has seen a substantial increase in calls from schools about winter illnesses such as diarrhoea / vomiting and flu-like illness. There have been increases across the whole region and, although the types of illnesses that are being reported are what we would expect at this time of year, the increase is earlier and greater than we have seen in recent years.

This letter provides advice for schools on managing increased levels of illness and an information leaflet that can be shared with pupils, parents and staff if schools are concerned about increased absences from pupils / staff as a result of this kind of winter illness.

We hope that by providing this advice / information to you, we can reduce the amount of work needed for all affected parts of the health and education systems.

### When to contact the Health Protection Team

As we are now aware that winter viruses are circulating widely across the North East, schools do **NOT** need to routinely contact the Health Protection Team to report increased levels illness. However, schools are welcome to contact the Health Protection Team for support and advice in complex situations.

We would like schools to contact us where there are reports of

- severe illness including hospitalisation
- if the school is attended by high numbers of children with underlying medical conditions that might make them more vulnerable to serious infection
- if there are unprecedented levels of parental concerns which have not been addressed through provision of the information leaflet and other routine measures / communications

### Advice on managing increased levels of illness

The most important steps in controlling increased levels of winter illnesses are

1. Excluding pupils and staff who are unwell  
Please ensure that pupils and staff who are affected do not come to school.  
Adults and children who are affected by flu-like illnesses should stay off school until they have recovered.  
Adults and children who are affected by diarrhoea and vomiting should stay off school until at least 48 hours after they last had diarrhoea or vomiting.
2. Encouraging good hand hygiene  
Hand-washing is an effective way to stop infections spreading.  
Please ensure that all pupils and staff frequently wash their hands with warm water and soap, particularly after using the toilet, after using a tissue to catch a cough or sneeze, and before eating.

### 3. Cleaning the environment

In addition to making sure that any vomit or diarrhoea on school premises is promptly cleaned up according to your usual protocols, increasing general cleaning of the school environment can also help to reduce the spread of winter illnesses.

For example, you may wish to ensure that there is twice-daily cleaning of areas (with particularly attention to door handles, toilet flushes and taps) and communal areas where surfaces can easily become contaminated (such as handrails).

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-protection-in-schools-and-other-childcare-facilities/chapter-6-cleaning-the-environment>

### **Closure of schools**

We **do not** routinely advise that schools close when there are increased levels of D&V or flu-like illness. Closing schools does not usually provide any protection against catching these illnesses, as there are likely to be high levels of the same illness circulating in the community. Children and staff will still be at risk of catching the illness whether or not they are at school.

Schools may choose to close for business continuity / staffing reasons or to facilitate cleaning of premises; this will be at the discretion of the school management team. However, there is no need for a school to remain closed for public health reasons.

### **Flu vaccination**

The flu vaccination is the best form of protection that we have against influenza (flu). There are several strains of flu and even if there has been illness at school, the vaccine may offer further protection against other strains of flu.

Parents should be encouraged to continue to engage in the school-based immunisation programme and to attend mop-up clinics if they miss scheduled sessions due to illness.

Toddlers aged two and three, children and adults who are in risk groups for flu (including those aged 65 years and over, pregnant women, people with long term medical conditions or weakened immune systems) should attend their GP or pharmacy for vaccination as soon as possible if they have not already been vaccinated.



## **FLU-LIKE ILLNESS AND DIARRHOEA / VOMITING IN SCHOOLS**

### **INFORMATION FOR PUPILS, PARENTS AND STAFF**

#### **General hygiene**

The spread of most infectious illnesses is reduced through good hand hygiene. Please ensure that you and your child wash your hands frequently with warm water and soap, particularly after using the toilet, after using a tissue to catch a cough or sneeze, and before eating.

#### **Influenza (flu)**

Flu and flu-like viruses spread easily between people from coughs and sneezes. They can live on hands and surfaces for up to 24 hours. Symptoms of flu may develop quickly and can include:

- Sudden fever
- Dry, chesty cough
- Sore throat
- Aching body
- Headache
- Tiredness
- Diarrhoea or tummy pain
- Nausea

For most healthy people flu is an unpleasant but self-limiting illness. However, some people can be more at risk of developing severe illness or complications including the following groups:

- those aged 65 years or over
- pregnant women
- those with a long-term medical condition – for example, diabetes or a heart, lung, kidney or neurological disease
- those with a weakened immune system – for example, because of chemotherapy or HIV
- those resident in long term care facilities

**If you or your child are in an at-risk group AND develop symptoms of flu, please seek prompt medical assessment via NHS 111, by a GP or a nurse who will be able to provide further advice.**

If you or your child are in an at-risk group AND have not had the seasonal flu jab AND are concerned that you or your child have had contact with someone with flu, please seek prompt medical assessment via NHS 111, by a GP or nurse.

If you or your child are not in an at-risk group but develop flu like illness and are concerned about your symptoms, please consult NHS 111, your GP or nurse in the normal way.

Staff members and pupils should not attend school or other communal settings if they have symptoms of flu and should only return once they have recovered.

The flu vaccination is the best form of protection that we have against influenza (flu). There are several strains of flu and even if there has been illness at school, the vaccine may offer further protection against other strains of flu.

Please continue to engage in the school-based immunisation programme and to attend mop-up clinics if your child misses the scheduled sessions due to illness.

Toddlers aged two and three, children and adults who are in risk groups for flu (including those aged 65 years and over, pregnant women, people with long term medical conditions or weakened immune systems) should attend their GP or pharmacy for vaccination as soon as possible if they have not already been vaccinated.

For more information about any of the above and advice about treating flu please visit <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/flu/>

### **Viral gastrointestinal illnesses**

It is not uncommon for viruses which cause vomiting and diarrhoea to circulate among children (for example norovirus, also known as the 'winter vomiting bug').

If pupils or staff members develop vomiting or diarrhoea, it is important that they stay off school and away from other communal settings until 48 hours after they last had diarrhoea or vomiting. As always, please contact NHS 111 or your GP if you are concerned about your child's illness.

Further information, including advice on treatment, can be found at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/diarrhoea-and-vomiting/>.

### **School closures**

Public Health England does not routinely advise that schools close when pupils and staff are affected by diarrhoea / vomiting or flu-like illness; this is because the viruses that cause illness are circulating in the community, so children will continue to be exposed to them even if not at school.

However, schools may need to close for other reasons e.g. not enough staff to safely stay open, closing for a short time to allow a deep clean of the school buildings.

Any decision about school closure will be taken by school management and any enquiries should be addressed to the school.