



Health & Safety Notes



Preparing for Pandemic Flu in Child Care Programs

What is Influenza (Flu)?

Flu is a respiratory illness caused by a virus. The illness generally occurs in winter and can cause mild or serious illness. The symptoms are worse than a cold and include fever, fatigue, coughing, sore throat and body aches. Every year in the United States, 5-20% of the population gets the flu, over 200,000 people are hospitalized and approximately 36,000 people die from complications. There are 2 types of flu, seasonal and pandemic flu.

Seasonal Flu

Seasonal flu has many different strains and predictable strains occur yearly. Generally, many people have been exposed over time and are immune. There is also a vaccine available to protect people, especially those who may be at risk for complications. The vaccine is good for one flu season, so a yearly vaccine is required to be protected from seasonal flu. Seasonal flu generally occurs during the flu season, which is November through February.

Pandemic Flu

Pandemic flu occurs when a new virus and subsequent illness is spread rapidly around the world throughout the year. Because it's new people have no immunity and a vaccine is not immediately available. These new viruses behave differently – some cause only minor illness and others may cause very serious illness and death in those that are infected. There have been major epidemics in the past century such as the Asian Flu in 1957 and the Hong Kong Flu of 1968. Both pandemics had high rates of serious illness and death. Health officials are closely monitoring a very lethal virus-the H5N1 bird flu virus-that has the potential to cause a new pandemic.

The 2009 H1N1 Flu (also known as Swine Flu)

The most recent pandemic, the 2009 H1N1 flu, although mild for most people, affected young children and pregnant women more than other flu pandemics. Now that there is an H1N1 vaccine and a high level of immunity among the people who were infected, it will become another seasonal flu whose spread can be predicted. Vaccination against H1N1 flu is still recommended for everyone and highly recommended especially for

high risk groups, which are pregnant women, caregivers of children under 6 months, anyone 6 months to 24 years, and people ages 25 through 64 years with chronic health conditions.

Why Prepare Your Program for Pandemic Flu?

Child care programs, schools and large public gatherings provide opportunities to spread viruses that cause flu. In the event of a pandemic, exclusion policies for ill children, staff members and those who have ill family members will become stricter. It is also possible that schools and child care programs will be closed by local public health officials to decrease the risk of spreading illness. Parents may not be able to work if they have to care for an ill child, another family member, or if they are ill themselves. A pandemic flu could seriously impact the staff and families in your program.

Steps to Prepare for a Pandemic:

Form a committee to plan how your program will deal with a pandemic flu. The committee may include staff members, a school district representative, the program director and parents/guardians.

Identify reliable sources of information. Watch for public health warnings about the flu, program closings and other recommendations to prevent the spread of flu.

Parents may be fearful and stressed so make sure the information you provide is correct and not based on rumor. Try to provide materials in the native languages of your families. The website www.flu.gov provides information in many languages. Another source for information on pandemic influenza is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) www.cdc.gov and Hotline at (800) CDC-INFO or (800) 232-4636. TTY (888) 232-6348. Questions can be e-mailed to cdcinfo@cdc.gov

Contact your local health department to learn about your community's plan for a pandemic. Determine who in your area will have the authority to close child care programs if there is a flu emergency. Decide how you will contact families and staff in the event of school or program closure. Communicate this information to families and staff.

Educate the children, staff and families in your program about preventive health practices. Hand washing (see the CCHP poster Wash Your Hands Properly), covering your cough and sneeze, coughing into your sleeve, getting a yearly flu vaccination and staying home when sick are topics that need to be discussed on a regular basis. Provide information about common sense measures to stay healthy such as eating a balanced diet, including a variety of healthy foods, drinking lots of water and going easy on salt and sugar. Encourage regular exercise and plenty of rest.

Improve procedures for routine cleaning and sanitizing. Toys, surfaces and furniture may require increased attention to cleanliness. Remember to use proper dilutions of sanitizers (see the CCHP publication, Sanitize Safely and Effectively), and provide plenty of ventilation.

Work with families. Encourage families to have a backup plan for child care if your program is required to close or if their child is ill. Talk about ideas like parents joining efforts to care for well children in small groups in their homes, contacting neighbors or extended family members or working from home when possible. Give families ideas for learning activities for young children while they are home.

Keep several days supplies of soap, paper towels, tissues and cleaning products that you will need to help control the spread of infection.

Plan for staff absences; including custodial services, waste management, food services and transportation. If your program provides meals, keep a back up supply of non-perishable and canned foods. Trash collection may be slowed or interrupted, so be prepared for uncollected garbage. Bathrooms may need to be cleaned by non-custodial staff members. Determine who will be in charge in the absence of the director.

Responding to Illness

Have families inform your program if a child or a family member has the flu and let families know if there are cases in the program. (See the CCHP form Exposure Notice.) Keep accurate records of when and why children and staff are absent. Include the symptoms that have been reported such as diarrhea, vomiting, coughing, rash etc. (see the Enrollment/Attendance/Symptom Record Form in Caring For Our Children, available on CCHP's website at www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org/pdfs/forms/Appendix_F.pdf).

Greet each child with a Morning Health Check to see if they are sick. (See the CCHP poster Morning Health Check.) Make it clear that any child or adult who is ill with any flu symptoms will not be admitted. Require all children with

flu symptoms to stay home until fever free for at least 24 hours (without the use of fever-reducing medications) and well enough to participate in activities in your program.

If a child becomes ill while at your program have a plan for keeping the child away from the other children such as assigning a sick room. An adult must stay with the child until the family or other designated adult arrives to pick up the child. Keep a supply of facemasks to reduce the spreading of germs if recommended.

Staff members must stay home if they think they are sick. If they become sick while at the program, they must go home and not return until fever free for at least 24 hours and well enough to perform their duties.

Communicate with your staff about the extent of illness in your program and any changes that may take place in the usual routine.

Recovering from Flu Pandemic

Communicate any changes in your program and provide information from public health officials to staff and families.

Provide resources and support to families who have experienced losses from the flu. Families may have loss of income, long-term health effects or deaths. Understand that pandemic flu will be a stressful event for many.

Adjust your program activities to reflect the energy level of staff and children. Provide rest time and quiet areas for children and staff who are recovering.

Identify families who may need long-term support or intervention and refer them to those services.

The California Childcare Health Program has many educational materials to help prevent disease. Visit the CCHP website at www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org or call the Healthline at (800) 333-3212. Additional materials can be obtained from the Immunization Coordinator at your local health department.

References and Resources

H1N1 Flu Resources for Child Care at www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/childcare/

Preventing the Flu poster in Eng/Sp at www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org

Pandemic Flu Checklist for Child Care Agencies and Preschools in California available at www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/documents/preschpflucheck.doc (cited 08/28/07).

U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for an Influenza Pandemic at www.osha.gov/Publications/influenza_pandemic.html.

by Bobbie Rose RN PHN