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Talking with Your Children about the H1N1 (Swine) Flu Pandemic

The H1N1 Pandemic

During the spring of 2009, the first cases of human infection with a new H1N1 flu virus (also called “swine flu”) were reported in the United States. Since that time, every state in the U.S. has reported cases of H1N1 flu infection. In early June, the World Health Organization (WHO) stated that a “pandemic” of new H1N1 flu was happening. A “pandemic” is a worldwide disease outbreak.

Flu Worries and Your Child’s Mental Health

Children are most comfortable when they can stick with their routines. Routines such as regular mealtimes, bedtime and playtime make them feel calm and safe. To reduce stress, encourage normal activities such as playing outside and socializing with other children. Reassure your children and tell them you will do everything you can to keep them healthy. Stay informed and follow the instructions of the child’s doctor, school health personnel and public health authorities. They will tell you what symptoms to look for, when to keep your child at home and when the child can return to school if they do get the flu. Teach your child common sense precautions (like frequent hand washing and covering a cough or sneeze with a tissue), so you can keep life as normal as possible and help your child feel more secure.

As the H1N1 pandemic continues, it’s likely that children will hear something about it on television or at school. **Here are some tips to help you minimize your child’s fears and help them stay healthy:**

1. Find out what they know.

Ask your child to tell you what he or she already knows about the topic. Having your child tell you what she or he has heard, instead of you telling them about it, lets you know what misconceptions or misunderstandings you may need to address.

2. Explain the facts.

Your child may have a lot of questions about H1N1 and seasonal flu. Clearing up your child’s confusion and providing the facts may make him or her less worried.

- Tailor the information to your child’s age, using words you know he or she will understand.
- You may wish to explain that H1N1 is a new virus which is currently spreading around the world. Although many people may get sick with the flu, almost everyone gets better and can return to normal activities in a few weeks.

- Be sure to explain that doctors and the government are working to protect everyone, and will be ready to treat children and families if they get sick with the flu. A vaccine should be available during the fall of 2009.

3. Talk about hygiene.

Take this opportunity to remind your child about good hygiene practices, which will not only help protect a child during a flu pandemic, but will also keep him or her generally healthy.

- Teach your child to wash hands frequently. Rub hands together for 20 seconds using soap and water. Explain that hands pick up invisible little germs that can make people sick. The germs get inside the body when children touch their eyes, nose, or mouth. Washing with soap and water gets rid of the germs before they can make children sick.
- Another option is to use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer: Apply to one hand. Rub hands together. Rub product over all surfaces of hands and fingers until hands are dry. Because hand sanitizers contain alcohol, make sure you keep them out of reach of your child when you're not using them.
- Teach your children to cover their coughs and sneezes with tissues. Explain that the germs are caught in the tissue and should be thrown out so they can't make other people sick. Make sure they know that they should throw away the tissue in the garbage and then wash their hands. Since many children do not carry tissues, you may want to remind them that if they have no tissue, it is ok to sneeze or cough into their sleeve or elbow, so the germs don't get on their hands or spread into the air. Understanding that everyone, including children, can play a role in helping to prevent further spread of the flu can help your child feel that he or she is contributing to and helping the community.

4. Stay home when sick.

It is important that you help your child follow the directions from doctors, schools and public health authorities to help prevent further spread of the flu. If your child is not feeling well and seems to have symptoms of the flu (fever and cough or sore throat), keep your child at home. Use the "Flu Symptom Check List for Families and Schools" (available at www.mass.gov/flu to determine when your child can return to school.

5. Make a plan.

During a pandemic, your child's routines may be interrupted. You may even find that authorities advise you to stay in your home for several days to prevent the spread of the illness. Think about what you will need in the event that this occurs and make a plan for your family so that you are prepared. Stock up on food, water, and medications. Also, age-appropriate games, toys, and activities will reduce stress and help maintain a normal schedule. Encourage regular communication with others such as email, phone calls and texting. Help children express how they feel using words, art projects and other pastimes. This can reduce fear and anxiety, improve communication and provide entertainment.

6. Stay informed of recent developments.

- Check the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu or visit the DPH website at www.mass.gov/flu frequently for updates.
- Listen to radio and television, and read media stories about the pandemic and follow the instructions of your local health authorities.
- Call Mass 2-1-1 (dial 211).

Adapted from the Children's National Medical Center, Washington, D.C.

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