



Mahoning County

DISTRICT BOARD OF HEALTH

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CONTROL OF INFLUENZA IN MAHONING COUNTY SCHOOLS

January 11, 2006

School principals and superintendents may be asked by parents, teachers, and public officials if and when schools should be closed in response to influenza. Influenza is a disease that affects many thousands of Ohioans each year. The District Board of Health advises local school officials to consider these factors as they determine their response to reports of influenza in the student population:

1. Decisions about school closing are normally made by school officials rather than the local health department. There are no national, state, or local public health guidelines for closing schools because of illness.
2. School closure to reduce community transmission of disease would be only one step in a number of restrictions of public gathering (i.e., closure of malls, theaters, stores, and workplaces) imposed by public health authorities. Closing schools would have little impact on disease transmission without these other restrictions on public gathering.
3. Schools may elect shorter-term closures when attendance among students or teachers is too low for efficient education to take place. As noted above, such closures are unlikely to have significant effect on disease transmission¹.

In addition, teachers and students should be reminded that:

1. Frequent and careful hand washing can reduce the transmission of influenza.
2. Covering the face when sneezing or coughing can help limit infecting others.
3. Influenza vaccine is readily available for adults and children from area physicians or the local health department and confers protection against the flu even when administered in late winter.
4. Prescription medications available for both children and adults can reduce the severity of influenza and decrease the risk of transmitting the virus. To get benefit from these medications, a child or adult who becomes sick should see their doctor within the first 48 hours of illness.

For more information about the control of influenza and other communicable diseases in the school environment, please contact Larry Frisch, M.D., M.P.H., at 330-270-2855 or 800-873-MCHD.

Matthew Stefanak, Mahoning County Health Commissioner

¹Influenza is very infectious. A susceptible person who comes into contact with the influenza virus is very likely to develop the disease within 3-5 days. Disease transmission does not require prolonged or intimate contact such as may occur in classrooms.

Once influenza enters a school, most children would already have been exposed before closure was implemented. Since people are infectious to others for a day or more before they develop symptoms, even non-sick children would likely be spreading influenza while officials decided on closure.

Despite being barred from school, children would likely be exposed by family members, friends/playmates, or through visits to public places. School closure alone is unlikely to keep children confined to their homes.

Even if some children avoided the flu by being sent home, they would remain susceptible and would still be likely to develop illness once they returned to school - unless the outbreak had already concluded when school reopened. As a result, school closing would be more likely to delay children developing illness than to prevent illness from occurring. To have any effect on influenza transmission, schools would have to remain closed until new cases in the community were no longer occurring. Closures of 4-8 weeks or more might have some effectiveness; shorter closures would be unlikely to reduce transmission.