



## MESSAGE TO NORTH EAST SCHOOLS from the NORTH EAST HEALTH PROTECTION TEAM

September 2022

As autumn and winter approach, it is likely that there will be increasing numbers of people affected by winter illnesses, such as diarrhoea and vomiting, flu and other respiratory viral infections. An increase in the number of scarlet fever cases is already being reported. We may also see the number of reported COVID cases increase over the autumn and winter period.

This letter provides advice for schools on managing increased levels of infection and an information leaflet which can be shared with pupils, parents and staff if required.

### **When to contact the Health Protection Team**

The Health Protection Team exists to protect the population from harm when outbreaks of infectious diseases occur, or when other hazards emerge. We can be contacted on the telephone number at the top of this letter. Schools are always welcome to contact the Health Protection Team for support and advice, especially in situations where large numbers of children are off school with similar symptoms. We are particularly keen to hear from schools when there are reports of:

- Chickenpox and scarlet fever cases occurring at the same time in the same setting – this is important as children who have had chickenpox recently can be at risk of more severe infection if they subsequently catch scarlet fever
- An unusual, rapidly increasing number of pupil or staff absences due to respiratory illness
- Severe illness (including hospitalisation) of pupils or staff
- High levels of parental concern about illness which have not been addressed through usual routes such as provision of the attached information leaflet

We would also encourage schools to contact us early if an outbreak is suspected and the school is attended by high numbers of children with underlying medical conditions, which may make them more vulnerable to infection, or if the school is a boarding or residential setting, where additional control measures may be needed.

### **General advice on managing increased levels of illness**

The usual, familiar measures for reducing transmission of infections in schools, which schools should take all year round, are particularly important during periods with high levels of circulating infection.

- **Exclude unwell pupils and staff**  
Pupils and staff who are unwell should not come to school. Those affected by respiratory illnesses should stay off school until they have recovered. Those affected by scarlet fever should be excluded

from school until 24 hours after their first dose of antibiotics. Those affected by diarrhoea or vomiting should stay off school until at least 48 hours after they last had diarrhoea or vomiting.

- **Encourage good hand hygiene**

Handwashing is a highly effective way of preventing many infections from spreading. Pupils and staff should 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. As they are not effective against some germs which cause gastrointestinal illnesses, hand sanitiser gels are not a suitable substitute for handwashing after using the toilet.

- **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 clearing of the school environment can help to reduce spread of winter illnesses. For example, you may wish to ensure that there is twice-daily cleaning of communal areas where surfaces such as handrails, door handles, toilet flushes and taps can easily become contaminated.

## **COVID-19**

As with any respiratory illness, any child or staff member who develops symptoms of COVID-19 should stay off school until any fever has resolved and they are well enough to do their normal activities. Although most people are no longer eligible for COVID-19 testing, any child who happens to have a positive COVID-19 test should stay off school for at least three days from the date of the test, and any adult who happens to have a positive COVID-19 test should stay off school for at least five days from the date of the test.

It is possible that we will see an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases over the autumn and winter period. Vaccination offers the best available protection against severe illness caused by COVID-19. **Anyone eligible for an NHS COVID-19 vaccination or booster should take up this offer.**

There is more information on the COVID-19 vaccine at

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-vaccination/>

## **Flu vaccination**

The flu vaccination is the best form of protection that we have against influenza (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, and children and adults who are in at-risk groups for flu, should attend their GP or pharmacy for influenza vaccination in the usual way.

There is more information on the flu vaccine for children at

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vaccinations/child-flu-vaccine/>

## **Advice for specific infections**

A suite of advice on management of specific named infections in schools is available on the UKHSA website. This includes details of the exclusion periods required for different infections:

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

Printable posters summarising the key points are also available to download:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/infectious-diseases-schools-and-other-childcare-settings>

### **Closure of schools**

The Health Protection Team **does not** frequently or routinely advise that schools close when there are increased levels of diarrhoea and vomiting, increased number of COVID cases, or increase numbers of cases of other winter illnesses. Closing schools does not usually provide substantial additional protection against catching illnesses which are commonly circulating in the community: children and staff will still be at risk of catching winter illnesses even if the school is closed.

Schools may choose to close for business continuity or staffing reasons, or to facilitate cleaning of premises. These are decisions for school management teams to make. Outside of exceptional circumstances, it is not usually necessary for a school to remain closed for public health reasons.

### **Teaching resource**

E-bug, operated nationally by the UK Health Security Agency, is a health education programme which aligns with the national curriculum from Early Years to Key Stage 4. It includes freely accessible teaching resources. You may find this of use in helping to educate children on good infection prevention behaviours. Please visit the following website for more information:

<https://www.e-bug.eu/>