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Pandemic Flu School Action Guide • Qs & As

What is Vermont's school action guide based on?

Community mitigation strategies (voluntary isolation, voluntary quarantine, school closing, child social distancing, adult social distancing) presented in Vermont's Pandemic Flu School Action Guide are based primarily on the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention guidance, issued in February 2007:

Interim Pre-pandemic Planning guidance: Community Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Mitigation in the United States — Early, Targeted, Layered Use of Non-pharmaceutical Interventions.

CDC's document set out, for the first time, a Pandemic Severity Index. This is a system that categorizes an influenza pandemic in much the same way that a hurricane is categorized (Category 1 being least severe and Category 5 most severe, as measured by case-fatality ratio). The guidance recommends community mitigation actions according to pandemic category (1, 2 and 3, 4 and 5) and setting (home, school, workplace).

Vermont's guide also incorporates information gained from school closing tabletop exercises, and best or promising practices from around the state and around the country.

Is this guidance for public schools only? What about boarding schools? What about childcare centers?

This guide is designed with elementary and secondary day schools — public or private — in mind, but it still provides a good basis for planning related to childcare centers and boarding schools.

Boarding schools, being similar to colleges and universities in their logistical concerns, could also benefit from planning underway at the University of Vermont and the state's colleges. At this point, some colleges are planning to close and some are planning to stay open in some fashion.

It is anticipated that large childcare centers will be asked to close at the same point that schools will be closed, and will be given similar guidance for the same reasons: to delay the wide spread of illness and lessen the numbers of people affected.

Further planning guidance and links can be found at the Health Department's website at HealthVermont.gov, then choose pandemic flu.

Who would make the decision to close schools? And who decides to re-open?

During a regular flu season, schools generally make their own decision to close and when to re-open, based on numbers of students and staff absent due to illness. In a pandemic situation, depending on the severity of the pandemic, health officials will likely recommend — and may use a health order — to close schools early on to prevent or delay spread of illness among students, staff and their families. The Vermont Department of Health will work together with the Department of Education to ensure that there is a plan in place for communicating with schools when this happens.

How long will a pandemic last?

Historically, a pandemic comes in waves of illness. No one can tell for sure how long a wave will last, how many waves there will be, or how long there will be between waves.

However, experts are planning for eight to 12 weeks of illness during the first wave, and expect that more medical intervention (vaccine and antiviral medications) will be available for the next wave of illness. This is why delaying the spread of severe illness or lessening the numbers of people affected is important.

Where do the morbidity (illness) and mortality (death) estimates for a regular flu season come from?

Every year during the regular flu season, an estimated 36,000 people in the U.S. die from influenza – related complications. This new estimate — substantially higher than the previous estimate of 20,000 deaths — was made in 2003 by scientists at the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention using new and improved statistical models in an in-depth study of the “real” causes of death in hospitals. The data were published in the Jan. 8, 2003 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA). Still, this higher estimate is considered by many experts to be an underestimate.

In a pandemic, the burden of death could be much higher. During the 1918 pandemic, there were an estimated 675,000 deaths in the U.S. from influenza. However, at that time medical experts didn't know the cause of influenza.

Who might be sickest in a pandemic, if it's not the very young, very old or people who already have serious health problems?

Healthy adults are usually not at risk for serious complications from seasonal flu. The very young, the elderly and those with certain underlying health conditions are generally at greater risk for serious complications.

By contrast, in a pandemic healthy young people who have little or no immunity to a novel strain of influenza may be at greater risk for serious complications. From the start of a pandemic, epidemiologists will be studying patterns of illness and death resulting from the new strain of influenza. This will help shape and refine disease control recommendations.