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

As the media coverage of H1N1 (swine flu) 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.

Flu Worries and Your Child's Mental Health

Children are happiest when they can stick with their routines, it makes them feel comfortable and safe. So keeping your child inside and not letting them play with friends when flu rumors begin to circulate may be stressful for your child. Stay informed and teach your child common sense precautions, so you can keep life as normal as possible and help your child feel more secure.

What to Say

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 (swine 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 (swine flu) is a sickness that pigs can get, and that these germs can change over time to become a sickness that people can get and pass to each other.
- Be sure to explain that doctors and the government are working to protect everyone, and will be ready to treat children and families with the flu if they get sick.

3. Talk about hygiene.

Take this opportunity to remind your child about good hygiene practices, as they will not only help protect a child during a flu pandemic, but will also keep him or her healthier in general.

- Teach your child to wash hands frequently. The correct way to wash hands is to rub them 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 when they touch their eyes, nose, or mouth. Washing with soap and water gets rid of the germs before they can make them

sick. Another option is to use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Sanitizers with at least 70% isopropyl alcohol or 60% ethyl alcohol are effective. 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 can't get out where they can 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 elbow, so their hands don't get dirty and so the germs do not spread into the air.
- Teach your children to be careful not to get too close to others if he or she feels sick, or if the other person feels sick.
- Teach your child to practice good general health habits that help them stay healthy, like eating a balanced diet, exercising, and getting enough rest.

Containing the Flu

It is important that you help your child understand the directions being given by the schools, health authorities, and government to help prevent further spread of the flu. Understanding that everyone, including children, can play a role in helping to prevent further spread of the flu can assist your child in feeling like he or she is contributing and helping the community.

If your child is not feeling well and seems to have symptoms of the flu, call your pediatrician. Follow your pediatrician's recommendations, including guidance about when to stay home from school.

Make a Plan

If a pandemic flu does emerge, anticipate that your child's routines may be interrupted. You may even find that authorities advise you to stay in your home 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 have games, activities, and ways to communicate with friends (like over email) ready for your children to make the time spent confined at home less stressful. Providing developmentally appropriate art, play, and other activities can help your child express how they feel, improve your communication with them, and provide them with entertainment.

Stay informed of recent developments.

- Check <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/> or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov/swineflu or visit the DPH website at www.mass.gov/dph/swineflu frequently for updates.
- Listen to radio and television, and read media stories about the pandemic and follow the instructions of your local health authorities.