

Swine Flu

The Chief Medical Officer has advised that swine flu continues to be a largely mild illness, and the Health Service has responded in a proportionate and timely fashion to the threat. There is no sign yet of any major change in the pattern or severity of the illness. On that basis, the CMO has confirmed that our advice to schools of 26 August remains our best advice: individual school closures are now of limited benefit in stopping the spread of the disease. However, it is essential that adults or children with flu-like symptoms should stay away until they are free of those symptoms.

We do know that some groups are particularly vulnerable to any illness, including swine flu. This can include some children and young people with particular health conditions, including some complex disabilities such as cerebral palsy, which can make it more difficult for them to fight off viruses. We are therefore providing, alongside guidance for mainstream schools, guidance for special schools. This advises them to seek Health Protection Agency advice when they have cases, so that the HPA can advise what measures to take, which may in some cases mean a temporary closure to reduce the risk to vulnerable children.

There is now a vaccine available and distribution has begun. I want to ensure that parents of pupils with these conditions have all the help and advice that they need to be aware that their children are being given a high priority for early access to vaccinations. It is for parents to decide whether their child should get vaccinated, but it is right that schools are aware of the programme and support the CMO's advice that children and staff in at-risk groups should respond positively when invited to get the vaccine.

For that reason, the Health Protection Agency has now made available guidance - versions for special schools and mainstream schools - that you can find at www.hpa.org.uk/swineflu/specialschools.