Public Health Wales Briefing: Increase in winter illnesses in education settings

Date of briefing: 12-Dec-25

Intended audience:

- *Local authority directors of education to cascade to school head teachers*
- *Health board Medical Directors, Executive Nurse Directors, DsPH, Health Protection Leads*
- *PHW Health Protection Teams*
- *PHW infection services (for dissemination to all Wales infection services)*
- *Welsh Government*

1. Background and rationale

Seasonal Infections on the Rise
In recent weeks, reports of infections like flu, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), and norovirus have been increasing. This has had an impact on schools and nurseries, with an increase in incidents (where there are at least 2 individuals unwell with the same infection) and enquiries from these settings. A sharp increase in respiratory incidents has been seen in the most recent weeks.

Protecting Against Flu and Other Winter Illnesses
The best protection against flu is getting vaccinated. The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) has recently written to schools to help encourage vaccine uptake.

There are also measures that schools and nurseries can take to prevent, slow and reduce the impact of infections. This briefing aims to summarise the recommendations, including sources of further advice and support.

What We're Seeing Right Now
Recent data shows that winter illnesses are on the rise across Wales with increases in:

- enquiries from schools and nurseries about respiratory infections
- Reports of respiratory infection incidents in schools (mainly primary) and nurseries
- Children admitted to hospital with flu that started in the community (ARI - Hospital admissions dashboard | Tableau Public)
- Increasing numbers of children with RSV infection (Weekly Influenza and Acute Respiratory Infection Report - Public Health Wales)
- Reports of gastrointestinal illness incidents and norovirus in recent weeks

Other infections are circulating and could increase over the winter, including whooping cough, scarlet fever, and respiratory viruses such as rhinovirus and enterovirus.

2. Messages and actions

Please familiarise yourself with the guidance available here: Guidance for childcare, preschool and educational settings - Public Health Wales which includes 'Exclusion Periods for Common Infections' and 'Health Protection in Children and Young People Settings including Education'.

Preventing winter illnesses
Vaccination is the most effective way to protect against flu. In line with CMO advice, schools should work with health boards, staff and students to promote uptake of flu vaccination by:

- Reminding parents to provide consent for planned flu vaccination clinics
- Signposting parents to information from your local health board or to the Public Health Wales website if a child has missed their vaccination, so they can find out how to get vaccinated
- Working closely with your local health board representatives to support vaccination clinics, plan follow up visits and any other actions as needed.

When Children and Staff Should Stay Home
Children and staff should stay home when they are unwell to stop the viruses spreading within schools and nurseries. Please ensure the 'Exclusion Periods for Common Infections' guidance is enforced.

In general, for all illnesses, adults and children should remain at home until they are well, and until 48 hours after diarrhoea, vomiting or fever have stopped. In addition, people who have tested positive for flu or have suspected flu should remain at home until 5 days after the start of their symptoms.

Stopping Infections from Spreading in Schools and Nurseries
Viruses and infections can spread easily through close contact and by touching shared surfaces. Detailed advice on infection prevention within schools and nurseries can be found in 'Health Protection in Children and Young People Settings including Education'

Some key points to help keep everyone healthy:

- **Clean frequently touched surfaces regularly** – cleaning surfaces like tables, taps, toys, and door handles regularly is especially important during winter.
- **Cover coughs and sneezes** with a tissue, throw it in the bin straight away, and wash your hands. Remember the message: **"Catch it, Bin it, Kill it."**
- **Wash hands often** for 15-20 seconds with soap and water – good hand hygiene is a highly effective way to prevent infection spreading from person to person.
- **Clean and cover any cuts or wounds**, especially bites, to reduce the risk of infection.
- **Let fresh air in.** Keep classrooms and shared spaces well-ventilated where possible as this can remove air that contains virus particles and prevent others from breathing them in

If a child or staff member has an underlying condition which impairs their immune system, they should contact their usual hospital doctor or GP to discuss whether any extra precautions are needed.

When to Contact Public Health Wales
Public Health Wales provides guidance to help schools and nurseries manage infections. 'Exclusion Periods for Common Infections' explains when children should stay home and when to seek advice. 'Health Protection in Children and Young People Settings' outlines what to expect when contacting the Health Protection Team and what information you'll need.

Please contact the Public Health Wales Health Protection Team via the AWARe service (aware@wales.nhs.uk or 0300 003 0032) if you notice any of the following in your school or nursery:

- A sudden increase or unusually high number of absences due to the same infection.

- Severe illness, such as someone being admitted to hospital.
- The incident continues for more than 3 weeks.
- Infections in a Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) unit.
- More than one infection circulating in the same group, for example chicken pox, flu and / or scarlet fever.

Thank you for helping keep our schools and nurseries healthy.

Additional resources:

Guidance for childcare, preschool and educational settings - Public Health Wales

Managing acute respiratory infections in special educational schools | GOV.WALES

Advice on respiratory viruses including COVID-19 for staff in health, social care and special schools | GOV.WALES

Guidance for people with symptoms of a respiratory infection, including COVID-19 | GOV.WALES

Management of scarlet fever outbreaks in schools

Flu Vaccination - Public Health Wales