

Hand-washing 101; Threat of the H1N1 virus spreading throughout schools has sparked a campaign to encourage students to regularly wash their hands and apply hand sanitizer

Author: Gravenor, J D.

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Full text:

Wash your hands! It's one of the first lessons our parents taught us when we were little. And your grandparents taught them the same thing once upon a time: use plenty of soap, rinse with hot water, dry off with a clean towel - and take your time!

You thought you had it all figured out. But now all of a sudden, everybody's talking about the importance of washing your hands all over again. You read it in the newspapers, see it on TV and hear it on the radio. There are even posters going up on school walls.

So what's the big deal about having clean hands?

H1N1, that' what.

Also known as the swine flu, it's a potentially deadly new form of influenza that, since this past spring, has claimed the lives of dozens of Canadians. Now that flu season is on its way back, H1N1 is threatening to return with a vengeance. And it's spread by human contact.

Of course, the easiest way to cope with and survive H1N1 is not to come into contact with this flu virus in the first place. That's why we're being reminded to protect ourselves with good hygiene - starting with washing your hands.

Mohammad Ullah, one of four students interviewed at Westmount High School, has never hesitated to wash his hands regularly. Now, he's lathering up even more often.

"Because of H1N1, I'm just trying to be on the safe side," said the 15-year-old Grade 10 student. "I'm more cautious about what I do. You can't see the virus, so washing your hands is one thing we have to fight against it, and stay healthy."

So what's so special about this flu strain? According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, H1N1 is an influenza virus that usually affects pigs, but which may also make people sick. The H1N1 flu virus is a respiratory illness that causes symptoms similar to those of the regular human seasonal flu. So if you're feeling sick with flu symptoms, it makes sense that you should stay home and seek medical attention. If you aren't sick, you should try to stay clean.

Grade 11 student Olivia Gilbey, 17, has heard a lot about H1N1. Until recently, she thought the issue may have been blown out of proportion.

"I've never thought, 'Oh, man, I could get the flu next week. It's going to be bad; I should wash my hands every two seconds.'

"Of course it's true, you think that there are people dying (of H1N1), but it's never been the main thing on my mind."

But with the huge emphasis that her parents, the media and school officials have put on H1N1, is she starting to change her own behaviour?

"Of course," she said. "Because all the parents are freaking out and the schools are putting in precautions. And it kind of makes you think, 'Maybe I should be washing my hands more.' I should maybe be thinking of who I'm shaking hands with or who I'm around with."

And to make sure kids keep their hands clean, schools like Westmount High are getting the message out with new curriculum and signage. And they're installing hand sanitizers, too, in order to halt the spread of the virus and encourage safe hygiene among students.

"For us, it definitely is a priority," said Westmount High vice-principal Steven Erdelyi. "We've purchased 12 hand sanitizers, which is obviously a start. We're installing them now in key areas, like the main office, for example, and gym, and near the guidance counsellors - areas that tend to be more high-traffic.

"At the same time, we're still encouraging students to wash their hands on a regular basis. We feel that it's more important for them to wash their hands. We don't want them to become complacent and assume that the hand sanitizer is better than soap and water."

Hand sanitizers are products often sold in pump bottles that dispense a foam or gel that kills most germs and viruses on contact. They don't replace good hand-washing, but they're the next best thing when you're rushing from class to class.

Chris Eustace is a West Island activist who has been staging a one-man campaign encouraging schools to install hand sanitizer dispensers.

"I think that hand sanitizers are definitely the way to go," said Eustace, who formerly taught at Pierrefonds Comprehensive High School.

He wants to see school officials get together with government to pay for and install dispensers in every Quebec classroom.

"At \$25-\$40 per unit, it's not big money," he said. "It would be a very healthy investment. There's no question about it. Schools are a breeding ground (for virus- and germ-borne illness)."

And it's not just in schools that we're seeing hand sanitizers. Grade 10 student Farhana Shema Begum, 15, has noticed them springing up all over the place.

"Even in hospitals," she said. "Like as you enter, you always have to put the hand sanitizer in your hands."

For her part, Begum is very well informed about the path of destruction associated with the H1N1 virus.

"First, they said it came from Mexico," she explained. "Then, it went to America. Then, it spread a little bit to Canada. And then, it went to Asia. And then, lastly, it went to Australia, I heard."

"Canada declared it as a pandemic," she explained. "I think statistics show that with the regular flu, 4,000 people die (across Canada per year). But when the H1N1 flu came, only 70 people died in Canada alone."

Still, she's not taking any chances. So she says that she will get her H1N1 flu vaccination once they are made available to the public later this fall.

Grade 10 student Emmett Keyserlingk, 14, has also learned a lot about H1N1 in the past few months.

"It's unavoidable," he said. "You're kind of compelled to listen. You've got a lot of people telling you a lot of different things. But you know it boils down to in the end, sanitation and public health."

He's not yet convinced that H1N1 will turn out to be the public-health disaster some health officials fear.

Nevertheless, the threat does bring an opportunity to learn the importance of keeping clean, and maybe saving yourself or someone you love from the effects of the virus.

"For a lot of people, it may be an excuse to be taught more about sanitation and keeping your hands clean and not coughing on your neighbour."

So it turns out that safety from H1N1 springs from common sense. But it's also good manners to wash your hands - just like our parents taught us.

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What do you think?

How has the threat of the H1N1 virus made you change your habits?

Write and tell us. Send a note, cartoon, even a photograph, as long as it arrives by Friday morning. Feel free to include your own story ideas.

Send email to schools@thegazette.canwest.com

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Illustration

Colour Photo: JOHN KENNEY, THE GAZETTE / Westmount High students Mohammad Ullah (left to right),

Emmett Keyserlingk, Farhana Shema Begum and Olivia Gilbey have changed their habits. ;; Caption:

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