



Infectious Diseases

NUT HEALTH & SAFETY BRIEFING



This briefing gives NUT guidance for members on the subject of infectious diseases in schools. It does not seek to provide detailed information about all of the different infectious diseases which are likely to occur in schools. Instead, it looks at general principles about how to manage cases of infectious illness, such as the principles governing children's attendance and exclusion periods, and identifies the best sources of advice on individual cases.

When should children be absent from school?

The basic principle advocated by the Department of Health is that children who are unwell with an infectious disease should not be at school or nursery. When the risk of infection to others has passed and the children have recovered, they should return to school whether or not vestiges of the disease are visible. It is important that parents and school staff understand this principle in order that children do not return before they should do. It is also important that school staff know where they can find information and obtain advice about such matters as exclusion periods.

Many LEAs have published guidelines for their schools, often in co-operation with local health authorities, on dealing with cases of infectious disease. Such guidelines may include information on steps to be taken when children appear to be suffering from infectious disease, exclusion periods for particular conditions and requirements for notifying the health authority about cases of 'notifiable diseases' or outbreaks of other diseases. Where such LEA guidelines exist, they should in all cases be followed. The following sections outline the NUT's guidance on these and other areas.

The situation is of course very different in hospital schools. Teachers who work in hospital schools should be given full guidance on working with pupils who have infectious diseases or other medical conditions. Teachers who are employed as home tutors should also be given appropriate guidance in any case where they are expected to visit pupils who are at home due to medical reasons.

What if you suspect a child is suffering from an infectious disease?

Children who attend school whilst suffering the early stages of infectious diseases can rapidly spread them among their fellow pupils. Clear directions should, therefore, be given to teachers and support staff in order that they know what to do when they suspect that a child is suffering some form of infectious disease.

The Department of Health emphasises that diagnosis should only be undertaken by an appropriately qualified health professional. Teachers should, therefore, immediately notify the headteacher of their concerns. The headteacher should then make arrangements, in accordance with any LEA guidelines, for the child to be examined by a health professional. This may involve temporary exclusion of the child and, in some circumstances, of close contacts as well. In such circumstances parents should, of course, be fully consulted and involved wherever practicable.

What about exclusion periods?

As noted above, the Department of Health advises that children should not attend school until after they have recovered and until the risk of infection to others has passed. The Department of Health

has produced guidance specifically for schools on exclusion periods for individual infectious diseases.

'Guidance on Infection Control in Schools and Nurseries' sets out recommendations on the length of time for which children suffering from particular infections should be kept away from school, once they are well again, to ensure that the risk of transmitting the illness to other pupils and adults has passed. It also includes information on other relevant matters such as hygiene control and immunisations.

This guidance has been published as a pocket guidance booklet and also as a poster for wall display. Copies are available from the Department of Health Publications Section at: PO Box 410, Wetherby, West Yorkshire LS23 7LN. If your school does not have copies of this guidance, you are encouraged to obtain them from this address.

Further information supplementing this guidance can be found at the Department of Health's Schools' Health website at www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk. This website contains links to further guidance at the Public Health Laboratory Service website at www.phls.co.uk

Where can schools obtain individual advice about the management of a particular illness?

Schools should seek advice either from the school nurse or doctor or from the local health authority's Consultant in Communicable Disease Control (CCDC).

The Consultant in Communicable Disease Control must be contacted whenever there are any cases of 'notifiable diseases' in the school among either pupils or staff. The CCDC should also be contacted if there appears to be an unusual number of cases of an infectious disease in a school or nursery. The CCDC's advice should be sought urgently if a food handler in the school is suffering from diarrhoea or vomiting.

What about outbreaks of infectious diseases?

During outbreaks of infectious diseases, in particular serious conditions such as Meningitis, it is important that parents, pupils and staff are fully and regularly informed. It is sensible for schools to hold information on infectious diseases and on steps which may need to be taken if there are cases at the school. In the same way that all schools have a named individual to deal with accidents and injuries, it is also sensible for each school to have a named person who will co-ordinate the school's response to this type of issue.

How can schools prevent the spread of infectious diseases?

The spread of some infectious diseases in schools, particularly diarrhoea and vomiting illnesses, including Dysentery and Hepatitis A, can be controlled through good hygiene procedures. Many LEAs give detailed guidance on hygiene control procedures and these should always be followed in every case.

These procedures include effective hand-washing with warm, running water and soap, after using the toilet and before eating. Paper towels or hand-dryers are best for drying hands. Spillages of body fluids e.g. blood, faeces, saliva or vomit, should be cleaned up immediately. Disposable gloves should always be worn. Surfaces on which body fluids have been spilled should be disinfected with household bleach, diluted one part bleach to ten parts water. The NUT is aware that some LEAs have banned the use of bleach. In such cases the alternative recommended by the LEA should be used. Whatever cleaning fluid is used must be stored securely, away from the reach of children. Secure disposal procedures must also be followed. All of the above should be the responsibility of support staff and teachers cannot be required to be involved in these matters.

Particular care needs to be taken to avoid transmission of infectious diseases to children from animals which are kept in schools or which are encountered during farm visits. The DfES and most LEAs produce detailed guidance on hygiene procedures in these areas which again should always be followed in every case.

How can teachers protect themselves from catching infectious diseases from pupils?

The most important measure is to ensure that children who are infectious are excluded as advised above. In the case of infections that cause diarrhoea or vomiting, adoption of the hygiene measures described above is also essential. In other cases immunisation may be necessary. Due to the resurgence of TB in certain parts of the country, teachers may wish to consult their GP to discuss whether they are sufficiently protected against this disease. Teachers who work with children who are in high risk groups for Hepatitis B may also wish to discuss with their GP whether immunisation would be appropriate. Women teachers who are considering becoming pregnant should, of course, check with their GP that they have immunity to Rubella.

What if teachers themselves become ill with an infectious disease?

Teachers who become ill with an infectious disease should remain absent until they recover and no longer pose a risk of infection to others. In rare instances medical suspension may be necessary. Guidance on this and on the provisions of the teachers' sick pay scheme is available in England from the NUT regional offices. In Wales, advice is available from the NUT Wales Office, NUT Cymru.

What about pregnant teachers?

During pregnancy, certain infectious diseases can pose dangers to unborn babies. The most serious of these is Rubella. Others include Chickenpox and Slapped Cheek Disease (Parvovirus). Information on precautions to be taken with regard to these diseases is contained in the NUT guidance document, 'Women's Health and Safety', available from NUT regional offices or in Wales from the NUT Wales Office, NUT Cymru. Pregnant teachers should contact their GP or ante-natal clinic if they are concerned about possible exposure to an infectious disease at school.

What if a child who is otherwise well needs to complete a course of medication during the school day?

A detailed NUT guidance document on this area, 'Administration of Medicines to Pupils', is available from NUT regional offices or in Wales from the NUT Wales Office, NUT Cymru. In summary, this advice states that teachers cannot be required to administer medicines to pupils.

The administration of medication by teachers is entirely voluntary. The NUT will support members in their exercise of their professional judgement whatever their decision. Teachers who agree to administer medicines should receive necessary guidance and training. There should be clearly understood arrangements for storage, transportation and administration of the medicine involved. Teachers who agree to administer medicines on behalf of their employer are deemed to be acting in the course of their employment and are covered by their employer's liability insurance.

Further Advice and Help

Advice should be sought from the NUT where you believe that your school is not properly and adequately dealing with the health and safety of staff or pupils or where you are unable to obtain advice from the other sources identified in this document.

For initial advice, you should contact the Health and Safety Adviser of your NUT division or association. Advice can also be obtained in England from your NUT regional office and in Wales from the NUT Wales Office, NUT Cymru.

NUT guidance documents on the following issues can be obtained from the NUT offices, or via the Health and Safety Post section of the NUT's website at www.teachers.org.uk

- Administration of Medicines to Pupils
- Meningitis
- Dysentery
- Viral Hepatitis
- Hygiene Procedures (includes guidance on HIV/AIDS)
- Head Lice
- Women's Health and Safety