

Keeping Children Healthy and At School

Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) has implemented standard procedures to prevent, monitor and respond to the spread of contagious diseases. Each year, a variety of illnesses are seen in students in our schools, including the colds and flu which are caused by viruses, bacterial infections caused by streptococcal and staphylococcal germs, and viral gastrointestinal illnesses. This fall, the media has been full of reports about ebola disease in Africa and enterovirus D68 that was first seen in the mid-west.

BPCS has full time school nurses in each school who take the lead in preventing and monitoring contagious illnesses.

What does BCPS do to prevent illnesses?

The best way to prevent the spread of contagious illnesses is regular and thorough hand washing. Beginning in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, students are taught the correct methods and times to wash their hands. Teachers regularly remind students to wash their hands.

Alcohol-based hand sanitizers kill many, but not all germs. Students are encouraged to use hand sanitizer when water for hand washing is not available. However, washing hands with soap and water is the single most effective way to prevent someone from becoming sick.

Cough and sneeze etiquette is also important. Students are taught to “sneeze into their sleeve,” and properly use and dispose of tissues.

Students with signs of contagious illnesses (i.e. fever, rash, vomiting and/or diarrhea) are excluded from the classroom and sent home. Students must be free from symptoms and/or cleared by a health care provider to return to school.

School nurses also provide screening programs for students who are at high risk for certain illnesses. For example, school nurses collaborate with the Baltimore County Department of Health (BCDH) to provide a tuberculosis screening program. This fall, nurses are using guidance from the Centers for Disease Control to screen students from certain countries to identify risk for ebola infection.

How does BCPS monitor contagious illnesses?

BCPS participates in the ESSENCE absence monitoring system. Each day, the Coordinator of Health Services and the epidemiologist at the Baltimore County Department of Health receive a report about absence rates in all schools and notes schools that have higher than normal absenteeism.

School nurses keep statistics on student illnesses and report situations that are out of the ordinary to the Baltimore County Department of Health.

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If a school nurse notes an abnormal/increased number or cluster of illnesses, the nurse immediately reports this information to the BCDH.

In addition, state law requires a school nurse to report a single case of certain illnesses (e.g., enterovirus D68, ebola, meningitis) to the local health department.

The Baltimore County Department of Health collaborates with the state health department and BCPS to provide guidance to parents and school staff on the response to unusual illnesses or clusters of illness.

In general, parents are not notified of routine illnesses that do not require special prevention, response or monitoring. Exceptions are sometimes made when the illness is creating concern in the media or is extremely widespread (e.g., H1N1.)

Parents are immediately notified by letter, the media and phone calls if their child may have been exposed to an illness that would require them to take the child to a health care provider, keep the child home from school, or take any other special precautions.

What Should Parents Do?

Parents can support the school system efforts in several ways:

Keep children home if they have a fever, vomiting or diarrhea. Do not send the child back to school until the symptoms have been gone for 24 hours.

Report any unusual illnesses to the school nurse.

If your child has a condition that requires special monitoring or care (e.g., your child is on medication that affects his or her immune system), notify the school nurse so the nurse can work with you and your child's health care providers on special steps to keep your child safe at school.

Reinforce and model good health habits like hand washing and cough/sneeze etiquette.

Be sure to keep your child up-to-date on immunizations, including annual flu shots and boosters for pertussis.

We write this to reassure you that our school system is well-prepared to prevent and respond to any illness that may arise during the school year. If you have concerns about your child's health, please call your school nurse (410-828-5285) or the Office of Health Services at 410-887-6368.