

TRANSLATION

Original: Arabic

WHO Clarifies Measures to be taken by schools to mitigate the effect of H1N1 pandemic

Baghdad - 26 October 2009 - WHO stated the measures to be taken to reduce the prevalence of H1N1 pandemic in Iraqi schools and recommended schools closure if case incidence reaches 1% among students.

The Iraqi Health Minister Dr Saleh Hasnawy, said that "decisions on the possibility and timely closure of classrooms and schools during epidemics depend on local conditions, pandemic spreading and the nature of its prevalence". He added that "The High Committee concerned with H1N1 pandemic, in collaboration with the Technical Committee and WHO believe in the role of precautionary measures to limit the virus prevalence in schools and the society in general. It is recommended for the time being that: students and teachers should stay at home whenever they feel ill, patients to be isolated, people should avoid crowded places and follow official bodies instructions and guidance".

Dr Hasnawy also said that schools proactive closure make it possible to decrease the pandemic speed and therefore decrease the burden on health care systems in the peak. However, schools closure policies should include measures aiming at limiting the proportion of students' contacts outside schools, as virus transmission will continue in case they meet in other places which greatly hinder the benefits gained from schools closure, and may render it futile.

On the other hand, Dr Naeema Al Gaseer, UNDP Chargé d'Affairs and Humanitarian Coordinator, and WHO Representative in Iraq emphasized the importance of promoting hands washing, sneezing/coughing etiquette, and storage of appropriate supplies. She also recommended that yards and classrooms should be cleaned and ventilated in a suitable way and implementing measures that aim at limiting congestion. She said: "The virus has multiple ways of prevalence, and that cases recorded up till now are simple ones, however virus circulation is expected once suitable prevalence environment is available. She added that we need full awareness of ways of how to be protected from the virus with no panic".

Dr Al Gaseer has also mentioned that the timing of schools closure is very importance and beneficial especially if implemented in the early stages of the pandemic. However consequent high social and economic cost should be taken into consideration.

Studies shows that schools closure may lead to the absence of 16% of manpower, in addition to annual and sick leaves. Closure may also hinder providing essential health care services, as many physicians and nurses are at the same time, parents of students at schools. Therefore, the committee recommended educational alternatives and other solutions such as classroom closure instead of whole school closure, teaching by satellites and internet.

The Ministry of Health in collaboration with WHO continue the implementation of the national plan to limit the pandemic prevalence. 24000 health workers have been trained on influenza pandemic preparedness through 80 workshops conducted in all governorates. 5000 kits including paediatrics sterilized tools have been distributed in 46 schools within the context of health friendly schools in all governorates, and 120 schools teachers were trained. More than 100 community leaders, volunteers and representatives from all directorates have been trained on basis of prevention and hygiene.

It is worth noting that WHO, in the 10th of the current month has explained measures that can be taken in schools to limit the impact of the influenza pandemic H1N1. These recommendations are based on recent countries experiences and on studies undertaken on consequences of schools closure.