

# Guide for Outbreak Prevention & Control in Child Care Facilities

Includes Respiratory, Gastrointestinal, Rash & Other  
Illnesses



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**If you have feedback about this guide email:**

[CDCResourceFeedback@albertahealthservices.ca](mailto:CDCResourceFeedback@albertahealthservices.ca).

If you have questions about a specific outbreak, or facility-specific processes, always direct your questions to your designated facility lead or the AHS Public Health Outbreak team.

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## Land acknowledgement

Our work takes place on historical and contemporary Indigenous lands, including the territories of Treaty 6, Treaty 7 & Treaty 8 and the homeland of the Métis Nation within Alberta and 8 Metis Settlements. We also acknowledge the many Indigenous communities that have been forged in urban centres across Alberta.

## Introduction

Child care operators are responsible to protect the health of children under their care and staff working in their facilities. Child care facilities are required to report outbreaks<sup>1</sup> and communicable diseases<sup>2</sup> under Section 26 of the Alberta [Public Health Act](#).

The Alberta Health Services (AHS) Public Health Outbreak team (including provincial and zone Medical Officers of Health, Communicable Disease Control and Safe Healthy Environments) collaborate with child care facilities to manage outbreaks of respiratory, gastrointestinal (GI), rash and other illnesses.

This guide provides best practice recommendations for outbreak prevention and control in licensed facility-based child care programs such as day care, preschool and out of school care to reduce the risk of spreading illness.<sup>3</sup> It was developed by AHS Communicable Disease Control and Safe Healthy Environments. It builds on the [AHS Health and Safety Guide for Operators of Child Care Facilities](#), which child care facilities follow at all times.

Licensed child care facilities must comply with applicable zoning and health and safety legislation. This includes the [Early Learning and Child Care Act](#) and the [Early Learning and Child Care Regulation](#).

- The term child care facility is used throughout the guide when referring to operators and staff in licensed child care facilities.
- Although this guide is intended for facility-based settings, home-based child care programs such as family day homes may use it as a resource.
- Home-based providers are not required to report illnesses or suspected outbreaks to AHS but may consult with AHS Population Public Health Support team (PPHST) for support.

## Child care outbreak checklist

Facilities may use the [Child Care Outbreak Checklist](#). This resource summarizes the key outbreak actions in a checklist format.

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<sup>1</sup> An outbreak occurs when there are more cases of a communicable disease than are normally expected in a specific time and place.

<sup>2</sup> A communicable disease is an illness caused by an organism or micro-organism or its toxic products that is transmitted directly or indirectly from a person with infection, an animal or the environment.

<sup>3</sup> Illness refers to [symptoms](#) of respiratory, gastrointestinal and rash illness.

## Always use outbreak prevention practices

Germs can spread from person to person or via contaminated surfaces. Use the following outbreak prevention practices every day to stop the spread of illness.

Child care operators are encouraged to develop their own specific plans to meet these recommendations, including a facility illness plan.



### Perform frequent hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette

- Encourage frequent hand washing. This is the preferred method for hand hygiene.
- Provide easy access to hand washing stations.
- Provide access to alcohol-based hand rub for adults.
  - Older children may use alcohol-based hand rub with supervision by staff.
  - Alcohol-based hand rub is not permitted for infants and toddlers.
- Promote respiratory etiquette (Cover Your Cough).
- Support those who choose to wear a mask.



### Promote immunization to prevent serious illness

- Encourage staff, families and children to get recommended vaccines, including COVID-19 and influenza.



### Provide a healthy, clean environment

- Follow the Public Health Recommendations for Environmental Cleaning and Disinfection of Public Facilities.
- Ensure frequent cleaning and disinfection of high-touch surfaces.
- Improve ventilation in the facility. For example, open windows to improve airflow when weather permits and maintain HVAC systems.



### Follow safe food handling practices

- Refer to information on food handling from AHS Health and Safety Guide for Operators of Child Care Facilities



### Know when a child can spread illness to others

- Children with respiratory or gastrointestinal symptoms may spread illness to others and are recommended to stay home (refer to [Watch for and report symptoms](#))
- Keep records of children's known pre-existing conditions such as allergies or asthma.
  - Parents in conjunction with a health care provider may determine if a child's symptoms are related to a pre-existing condition.
- Children may have symptoms for reasons other than due to a respiratory or gastrointestinal illness.
  - Discuss symptoms with parents/guardians to determine if there may be an alternative cause.

### Stay home when ill

- Remind parents/guardians to keep ill children home.
- Remind staff not to work when ill.

### Follow facility illness plan if symptoms are identified

- Request staff watch children for new [symptoms](#) of illness and follow the facility illness plan if symptoms are identified.
- Keep children away from others if they are ill at the facility.
- Contact parents/guardians to pick up ill children as soon as possible.
- Send ill staff home.

### Care for children with respiratory illness

- Have staff wear a mask.
- Offer a mask to children over two years of age if tolerated.

### Care for children with GI illness

- Use a dedicated washroom. If a dedicated washroom is not available, clean and disinfect the shared washroom between use.
- Have staff wear gloves and gown/protective clothing while caring for a child with GI illness.
  - Wash hands before and after wearing gloves.
- Consider using personal protective equipment such as a gown/protective clothing or mask/face shield to protect clothing and face.



## Inform parents/guardians and staff when it is safe to return after illness

### Respiratory illness

Stay home until:

- All symptoms have improved<sup>4</sup> **AND**
- Feeling well enough to resume normal activities **AND**
- Fever-free for 24 hours without using fever-reducing medications.

Refer to [COVID-19 information for Albertans](#).

### GI illness

Stay home until 48 hours after the last episode of vomiting and/or diarrhea.

### Rash /other illnesses

Stay home for the length of time recommended by a physician, nurse practitioner or the AHS Public Health Outbreak team.

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<sup>4</sup> Improved means the child feels better than on the previous days.

## Watch for and report symptoms



Report illness to the AHS Provincial Public Health Support team (PPHST) at **1-844-343-0971**.

PPHST is a provincial, centralized outbreak reporting and response team. They provide initial support and direction to child care facilities reporting possible outbreaks.

Illness type	Watch for new onset of these symptoms <sup>5</sup>	When to report
<b>Respiratory illness</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cough</li> <li>Shortness of breath</li> <li>Sore throat</li> <li>Loss or altered sense of taste/smell</li> <li>Runny nose or nasal congestion</li> <li>Fever</li> <li>Fatigue (significant and unusual)</li> <li>Muscle ache or joint pain</li> <li>Headache</li> <li>Nausea or diarrhea</li> </ul>	<b>Within a seven-day period:</b>  Report two or more children (from different households) with <b>new onset</b> of two or more symptoms.
<b>GI illness</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two or more episodes of diarrhea in a 24-hour period <b>OR</b></li> <li>Two or more episodes of vomiting in a 24-hour period <b>OR</b></li> <li>One or more episodes of vomiting and diarrhea in a 24-hour period <b>OR</b></li> <li>One episode of bloody diarrhea <b>OR</b></li> <li>Laboratory confirmation of a pathogen known to cause GI illness.</li> </ul>	<b>Within a 48-hour period:</b>  <b>Children:</b> Report two or more  <b>Staff:</b> Report if there is an unusual increase in GI illness (above the baseline) even if staff were not present at work with symptoms.
Illness type	When to report	
<b>Rash illness</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Report three or more children with a similar rash illness within a 10-day period.</li> </ul>	
<b>Other illness</b> 	Some diseases may benefit from further advice and/or investigation. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Report any other illnesses of concern such as measles, mumps, pertussis (whooping cough), meningitis or hepatitis.</li> </ul>	

<sup>5</sup> Symptoms due to a preexisting condition do not need to be reported to PPHST.

## After the child care facility has reported to PPHST

### PPHST will notify the AHS Public Health Outbreak team

- After the report is made, PPHST will:
  - Send a summary to the AHS Public Health Outbreak team
  - Advise the facility when to expect a response from the AHS Public Health Outbreak team.

### Communication from the AHS Public Health Outbreak team to the facility

The AHS Public Health Outbreak team will phone the facility to gather more information and determine if an outbreak will be opened.

If an outbreak is opened, the AHS Public Health Outbreak team will:

- Provide instructions for reporting additional ill children and staff.
- Direct the facility to continue with routine [outbreak prevention practices](#) and to start implementing [control measures to use for every outbreak](#).
- Advise how to contact the AHS Public Health Outbreak team during the outbreak.

For respiratory illness and rash outbreaks:



Call 1-833-592-2029

or



Email [CD\\_Outbreak\\_School\\_DayCare@albertahealthservices.ca](mailto:CD_Outbreak_School_DayCare@albertahealthservices.ca)

For GI Illness outbreaks:

- Use the contact information provided by the AHS Public Health Outbreak team.

## Control measures to use for every outbreak

### Communicate about the outbreak

- Inform parents/guardians, staff and visitors about the outbreak.
- Report newly symptomatic children and staff daily to the AHS Public Health Outbreak team.
- The AHS Public Health Outbreak team may provide an outbreak notification letter to inform parents/guardians of the outbreak.
  - Distribute the letter to parents/guardians if requested by the AHS Public Health Outbreak team.
  - Consult with the AHS Public Health Outbreak team before distributing additional information about the outbreak. This ensures up-to-date and accurate information is provided.

### Encourage frequent hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette

- Refer to the Personal Hygiene section in [AHS Health and Safety Guide for Operators of Child Care Facilities](#).

### Enhance cleaning and disinfection to prevent spread of illness

- Increase frequency of cleaning and disinfection of common areas and high-touch surfaces such as doorknobs, light switches, tabletops and washrooms.
- Clean and disinfect shared items between users.
- Remove shared items such as craft supplies, books and puzzles that cannot be cleaned and disinfected.
- Use hand hygiene before and after using play structures that cannot be cleaned and disinfected.

### Decrease the use of common or shared items

- Use shared play structures one group at a time.
- Close shared sensory tables including water/sand tables.
- Allow sensory bins or activities to be used only if they are not shared between children such as play dough labelled for individual child use or individual water bowl with sensory activities.
- Keep water fountains open only if they can be cleaned and disinfected frequently.

### Prepare and serve food safely

- Ensure staff who support meals are feeling well and practice hand hygiene.

- Cease family-style meal service.
- Remove shared food containers such as water pitchers and salt and pepper shakers.
- Hand out snacks directly to children.

## **Minimize mixing of groups**

- Have a plan to maintain child to staff ratios during an outbreak.
- Keep children and staff within the assigned child care room, including during naps, meals and snack times.
- Move some group activities outdoors if weather permits.
- Follow physical distancing practices during respiratory illness outbreaks when possible.
  - Maintain distance between staff in common areas such as staff rooms.
- Postpone high-risk field trips and activities such as:
  - Visits to crowded indoor venues
  - Destinations that require shared transport
  - Hands on activities with shared items
  - Field trips and activities that have multiple groups participating
  - Visits involving vulnerable populations such as continuing care homes, supportive living accommodations and hospitals.

## **Manage shared transportation**

Staff and bus drivers:

- Wear a mask when transporting a child with respiratory symptoms.
- Provide a mask to children with respiratory symptoms if tolerated.
- Stock gloves, gown/protective clothing, cleaning and disinfection products and plastic garbage bags to clean and contain vomit or diarrhea.
- Increase frequency of cleaning and disinfection of shared transport vehicle, including high-touch surfaces such as door handles, rails and the steering wheel.

## **Control measures that may be used for complex outbreaks**

The AHS Public Health Outbreak team will assess and monitor the outbreak in collaboration with the child care facility. Depending on the assessment and the type of outbreak, additional outbreak control measures may be recommended including:

- Modifying routine activities to limit the spread of illness
- Postponing special events, off-site activities and performances or celebrations that involve family members and visitors
- Other measures for better outbreak control not outlined in this guide.

## Ending an outbreak

The AHS Public Health Outbreak team determines when the outbreak is over and advises when the control measures may be discontinued. The facility resumes routine [outbreak prevention practices](#) when the outbreak is over.

If additional children or staff develop symptoms within seven days of the outbreak ending, report to PPHST and let them know that an outbreak recently ended at the facility.