

Provincial Population & Public Health

# Guide for Outbreak Prevention & Control in Schools

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 school-specific processes, always direct your questions to your designated site 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

School superintendents/designates are responsible to protect the health of students under their care and staff working in their schools. Schools are required to report outbreaks<sup>1</sup> and communicable diseases<sup>2</sup> under Section 26 of the Alberta [Public Health Act](#).

This guide provides best practice recommendations for outbreak prevention and control in schools to reduce the risk of spreading illness.<sup>3</sup> It was developed by AHS Communicable Disease Control and Safe Healthy Environments.

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

The term school is used throughout the guide when referring to roles and responsibilities of school administrators and staff.

### School outbreak checklist

Schools may want to print the [School 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. Schools are encouraged to develop school-specific plans to meet these recommendations.



### Perform frequent hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette

- Encourage frequent hand washing and/or use of alcohol-based hand rub.
- Provide easy access to alcohol-based hand rub and hand washing stations.
- Promote respiratory etiquette (Cover Your Cough).
- Support those who choose to wear a mask.



### Promote immunization to prevent serious illness

- Encourage staff, families and students 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 school. For example, open windows to improve airflow as weather permits and maintain HVAC systems.



### Follow safe food handling practices

- Refer to information from Environmental Public Health for Schools at Information for Your Business.

#### **Handle food with care.**

- Provide access to hand sanitizer and hand washing stations. Encourage hand hygiene for staff and students prior to handling food or eating.
- Minimize student handling of shared food and serving utensils.
- Provide students with plates, cups and utensils and discourage sharing.

#### **Keep kitchen and dining areas clean.**

- Clean and disinfect all surfaces of tables and chairs, including the underneath edge of the chair seat and table after each meal.



### Stay home when ill

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

### Monitor for illness

- Request staff watch students for new symptoms of illness and follow the school illness plan if symptoms are identified.

### Have a plan for illness

- Send ill staff home as soon as possible.
- Keep students away from others if they are ill at school.
- Contact parents/guardians to pick up ill students as soon as possible.

### Care for students with respiratory illness

- Have staff wear a mask.
- Offer a mask to students if tolerated.

### Care for students 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 while caring for a student with GI illness.
  - Wash hands before and after wearing gloves.
- Consider using additional personal protective equipment such as a gown/protective clothing or mask and face shield to protect from splashes.



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

|                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>Respiratory illness</b>      | <p>Stay home until:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All symptoms have improved <b>AND</b></li> <li>• Feeling well enough to resume normal activities <b>AND</b></li> <li>• Fever-free for 24 hours without using fever-reducing medications.</li> </ul> <p>Refer to <a href="#">COVID-19 Information for Albertans</a>.</p> |
| <b>GI illness</b>               | Stay home until 48 hours after the last episode of vomiting and/or diarrhea.   |
| <b>Rash and other illnesses</b> | Stay home for the length of time recommended by a physician, nurse practitioner or the AHS Public Health Outbreak team.  |

## 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 schools reporting possible outbreaks.

| Illness type  | Symptoms to watch for   | When to report  |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Respiratory and GI illness</b><br> | <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 or 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</li> <li>• Vomiting</li> <li>• Diarrhea</li> </ul> | <p>Report <b>10% student absenteeism</b> due to illness <b>OR</b> an unusual amount of students with similar symptoms.</p> <p><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.</p> |
| Illness type  | When to report  |   |
| <b>Rash illness</b><br>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Report three or more students with a similar rash illness within a 10-day period.</li> </ul>   |   |
| <b>Other illness</b><br>             | <p>Some diseases may benefit from further advice and/or investigation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Report any other illnesses of concern such as measles, mumps, pertussis (whooping cough), meningitis, hepatitis and group A streptococcal infections.</li> </ul>  |   |

## After the school 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 school when to expect a response from the AHS Public Health Outbreak team.

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

The AHS Public Health Outbreak team determines if the school meets the criteria for an outbreak and will email or phone the school to advise if an outbreak will be opened.

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

- Provide instructions for reporting additional ill students and staff.
- Direct the school 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 students, staff, parents/guardians and visitors about the outbreak.
- Report newly symptomatic students 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 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

- Encourage frequent hand washing and/or use of alcohol-based hand rub.
- Promote respiratory etiquette (Cover Your Cough).

### 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, desktops and washrooms.
- Clean and disinfect shared items such as computers between users.
- Remove shared items such as art supplies 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 students such as play dough labelled for individual student 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.
- Remove shared food containers such as water pitchers and salt and pepper shakers.
- Hand out snacks directly to students.

## Minimize mixing of groups

- Minimize mixing different classes and groups.
- Follow physical distancing practices during respiratory illness outbreaks when possible.
  - Stay apart from others in common areas such as hallways and washrooms.
  - Maintain distance between staff in common areas such as staff rooms and washrooms.
- Postpone high-risk field trips and activities such as:
  - Visits to crowded indoor venues
  - Overnight trips
  - Destinations that require shared transport
  - Hands on activities with shared items
  - Field trips and activities that have multiple classes 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 student with respiratory symptoms.
- Advise the school of any ill students.
- Provide a mask to students 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 the 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 school. Depending on the assessment and the type of outbreak, additional outbreak control measures may be recommended, including:

- Modifying classroom activities to limit the spread of illness
- Moving classes outdoors where possible such as physical education
- 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 an outbreak is over and advises when the control measures may be discontinued. School resumes routine outbreak prevention practices when the outbreak is over.