

Guide for Outbreak Prevention and Control in Schools

Includes Respiratory, Gastrointestinal and Rash Illnesses

September 2022

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Introduction

School superintendents/designates are responsible to protect the health of students under their care and staff working in their facilities. Alberta Health Services (AHS) seeks to work collaboratively with schools to prevent disease transmission. This includes preventing the spread of respiratory, gastrointestinal (GI), rash, and any other unusual illness identified within the school.

Schools should take the following measures to help prevent outbreaks and keep students and staff safe:

- Implement practices to minimize the risk of disease transmission such as those outlined in the [General Outbreak Prevention Practices](#) section.
- Develop policies and protocols to rapidly identify and manage individuals with symptoms of illness.
- Promote high levels of environmental cleaning and personal hygiene.
- Comply, to the extent possible, with AHS recommendations.

Scope

This guide is for the prevention, identification, reporting, assessment, control and management of common communicable disease outbreaks in schools in Alberta.

The term schools will be used throughout the guide to describe roles and responsibilities of administrators and staff. This guide provides general reporting processes and outbreak prevention measures for schools. The AHS Public Health Outbreak Team (zone Medical Officers of Health, Communicable Disease Control, and Environmental Public Health) may recommend further measures to be implemented if required by an unusual outbreak.

The notification of outbreaks and other infectious disease threats in Alberta is mandated under Section 26 of the Alberta *Public Health Act*.

Schools and families have an important role in helping control the spread of illness in schools. Immunization is an important public health measure, and all families, students and staff are encouraged to complete their routine immunizations, as well as COVID-19 and influenza immunizations

General outbreak prevention practices are important to prevent the spread of all communicable diseases. Schools are strongly encouraged to implement the general outbreak prevention practices listed in this guidance.

General Outbreak Prevention Practices

- Parents/guardians should assess their children daily for new symptoms of illness.
- Students and staff should not attend school if they are ill.
- Encourage hand hygiene for students and staff.
- Encourage staff and students to practice [respiratory etiquette](#).
- Ensure frequent cleaning and disinfection of high touch surfaces using an appropriate product(s) – see [Public Health Recommendations for Environmental Cleaning of Public Facilities \(albertahealthservices.ca\)](#).
- [Optimize indoor air quality](#) and ensure ventilation systems are maintained in accordance with manufacturer operational guidelines.
- Water fountains should be cleaned and disinfected frequently.

- For student transportation, have a plan that outlines cleaning and disinfecting protocols.
- Face masks are not required; however, students and staff can decide based on their own risk whether they want to wear a face mask.
- Schools are encouraged to have a plan in place if a student/staff member develops any symptoms of illness while at school.
 - Ill students or staff should be sent home, where possible by private transportation.
 - Ill students or staff should remain isolated in an area away from others while waiting to go home and may be provided with a face mask to wear (if appropriate).
 - Use of face masks by school staff is recommended for interactions with symptomatic students.
- It is recommended that symptomatic individuals stay at home until they are feeling well, are able to fully participate in all normal school activities and have reached the end of the recommended isolation period (as applicable):
 - Respiratory Illness - Isolation recommendations can be found [here](#)
 - Gastrointestinal Illness - 48 hours after symptoms resolve
 - Rash Illness – depends on the type of rash that is present
 - Cases with rash illness do not need to be excluded if others at the school were already exposed to the case while infectious and the case is feeling well enough to fully participate in all normal school activities, unless exclusion is specifically recommended by the AHS Public Health Outbreak Team.

It is recommended that all staff:

- Be aware of the school policy regarding illness and attendance.
- Monitor for and report additional cases of illness to the school designate.
- Be familiar with any applicable policies or procedures related to preventing transmission of illness including hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, cleaning and disinfecting etc.
- Have access to hand sanitizer or hand washing stations, as available.

Reporting Illness to the AHS Public Health Outbreak Team

Illness Surveillance

Schools are responsible for identifying and reporting unusual occurrence of similar symptoms (see [Table A](#)). Schools are asked to track the number of ill students as well as the symptoms reported by parents/guardians.

How to Report Illness

If the reporting criteria below or met, the school should call the AHS Coordinated Early Identification and Response (CEIR) team, a provincial, centralized outbreak reporting and response resource. CEIR is available to schools at 1-844-343-0971. A school that *does not already have an outbreak identified must* contact CEIR as soon as illness is identified as per [Table A](#). CEIR will provide initial guidance and decision-making support to the school.

If an outbreak is identified, the AHS Public Health Outbreak Team will review initial outbreak control measures with the school to help reduce the spread of illness and will advise about how subsequent case reporting should be submitted based on the type of outbreak.

Table A – Reporting Illness to CEIR

Report to **CEIR at 1-844-343-0971** when the Reporting Criteria is met for these illnesses:

Type of Illness	Reporting Criteria (must be from different households)
Respiratory or Gastrointestinal (GI) Illness	<p>10% student absenteeism due to illness OR an unusual amount of individuals with similar symptoms:</p> <p><i>Symptoms: cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, loss or altered sense of taste/smell, runny nose/nasal congestion, fever, fatigue (significant and unusual), muscle ache/joint pain, headache, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea</i></p> <p><i>Note: If there is an unusual increase in illness amongst staff (above the baseline of what would be expected), whether they were present at work with symptoms or not, it should be reported to CEIR as this could be an indicator of a potential outbreak</i></p>
Rash Illness	3 or more students with a rash illness within a 10-day period

Report to CEIR if there are questions or concerns about other unusual illnesses:

Other Unusual Illness	Schools may call CEIR regarding diseases that may benefit from further advice and/or investigation, including Measles, Mumps, Pertussis (Whooping Cough), Meningitis, Hepatitis A, and any other illnesses of concern.
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Outbreak Measures

When CEIR is notified as per the *Reporting Criteria* in Table A, the AHS Public Health Outbreak Team will:

- Contact the school to review details about the type of illness reported to CEIR. After this assessment, they will advise whether the outbreak definition has been met.
- Review General Outbreak Prevention Measures that are already in place in the school.
- Provide information and recommendations to assist school staff in preventing further spread of illness in the school.
- Provide an information letter to the school for dissemination to parents/guardians if deemed appropriate. The letter can make parents/guardians aware of the increased illness in the school and provide recommendations to prevent the spread of illness, including keeping ill students at home. Schools should not send out their own information letters informing parents of increased illness or communicable diseases in the school without consulting the AHS Public Health Outbreak Team.

Additional Outbreak Measures

The AHS Public Health Outbreak Team will assess and monitor the outbreak. Symptomatic individuals should not participate in off-site activities where there is potential to expose new people/places to illness. Depending on their assessment and the type of outbreak occurring, additional outbreak measures may be recommended, in collaboration with school leadership.

General

- The AHS Public Health Outbreak Team will provide guidance to the schools including information that can be shared with the school community regarding how to identify and prevent illness.
- Depending on their assessment, the AHS Public Health Outbreak Team may recommend some or all of the following for affected groups:
 - Minimize the use of common or shared equipment. If shared use is necessary, clean and disinfect between groups.
 - Special events, performances or celebrations that involve bringing in family members/visitors be postponed (these events may lead to new exposures).
 - Postpone high-risk field trips and consider postponing other off-site activities during the outbreak. Higher risk activities might involve:
 - Crowded indoor venues
 - Overnight trips
 - Hands on activities with shared items
 - Multiple classes attending
 - Shared transport
 - Vulnerable populations (e.g., congregate care, hospital)
- Moving some classes outdoors where possible (e.g., physical education).
- Minimize mixing of different classrooms.
- Distancing in common areas, if possible (e.g., hallways, washrooms).

Cleaning and Disinfecting

- Increase frequency of daily cleaning and disinfection of common areas and surfaces. Pay particular attention to doorknobs, light switches, washrooms and other high-touch surfaces.
- Stress hand hygiene for students and staff both at home and at school.
- Items such as books and puzzles that cannot be cleaned and disinfected between uses should stay within each classroom only.
- Water fountains can remain open and should be cleaned and disinfected frequently.

Transportation

- If a student becomes symptomatic with respiratory illness during on a trip, a face mask may be made available as per site policy and worn by the student as tolerated. The driver should contact the school to make the appropriate arrangements for the student to be picked up.
 - Drivers should consider wearing a face mask.
- Increase frequency of cleaning and disinfection of applicable high-touch surfaces, such as door handles, rails, steering wheel, mobile devices and GPS prior to each run.

Closing an Outbreak

- The AHS Public Health Outbreak Team will continue to monitor illness at the school regularly to determine the extent/duration of outbreak as needed.
- The AHS Public Health Outbreak Team will advise schools when the control measures can be lifted, and the outbreak can be closed.

Other Resources

- [AHS IPC Hand Hygiene Resources](#)
- [COVID-19: School Indoor Air Quality \(IAQ\)- Mechanical Ventilation in Schools](#)