

# Management of Outbreaks of Communicable Disease in Schools

This document provides school administrators with a high level overview of the outbreak management processes that Alberta Health Services (AHS) Public Health professionals will employ in the event that they receive reports of potential outbreaks within the school setting. It does not contain all the specific infection control practices and other recommended measures pertinent to controlling outbreaks in schools. AHS Public Health staff will communicate these specific details to the school outbreak contact (principal or designate) as appropriate.

## Reporting/Notification

The notification of outbreaks and other infectious disease threats in Alberta schools to the Medical Officer of Health is mandated under Section 26 of the Alberta *Public Health Act*. It is the responsibility of the Medical Officer of Health or their designate to investigate and carry out actions to protect the public and limit the spread of the disease. Communicable diseases include those that are:

- respiratory such as COVID-19 or influenza,
- gastro-intestinal such as norovirus, and
- infectious rashes.

All schools are required to monitor absenteeism rates within their school. If there is a school-wide absence rate of 10% or greater due to illness OR there is a higher than expected number of individuals with similar symptoms, schools must **report to Alberta Health Services (AHS) using the [online reporting form](#) or by calling the Coordinated Early Identification Response (CEIR) team at 1-844-343-0971**, regardless of the school's participation in Alberta Real Time Syndromic Surveillance Network (ARTSSN). This may be a change in process for schools that have previously connected with their local Public Health Nurse to report absenteeism. The purpose of this reporting is to monitor for clusters of respiratory, gastrointestinal or rash illness and to alert AHS to potential disease outbreaks.

## Investigation

Once AHS has been notified of absenteeism of 10% or an unusual number of individuals with similar symptoms, an investigation will be conducted by AHS Public Health. They will contact the school to collect additional information such as type of symptoms, onset of symptoms, number of students/staff ill, and total school population. In some instances the school contact may not be able to provide all of the information required and will be asked to provide students' names and contact information so that Public Health can contact the parents of ill students to gather key information for their assessment.

## Outbreak Declaration and Control Measures

School administrators have an important role to help prevent and control the spread of illness by providing information and implementing required control measures. If there is a 10% or greater absenteeism rate that includes similar symptoms it is likely that AHS Public Health will declare

an outbreak. If the absenteeism is due to multiple different illness types (e.g. some students are absent with vomiting and diarrhea while other students have cough and runny nose), an outbreak may not be declared. Once AHS declares an outbreak, AHS Public Health will recommend control measures to reduce ongoing transmission for the duration of the outbreak.

These control measures **may** include:

- active health screening with questionnaires such as the [Alberta Health Daily Checklist](#),
- increasing frequency of cleaning and disinfection,
- mask recommendations,
- limiting group/extra-curricular activities,
- creating cohorts, or
- limiting student mixing and/or movement

In some situations, an AHS Public Health Inspector will conduct an onsite assessment and provide additional recommendations and advice.

### Communications

AHS Public Health will provide the school with an information letter regarding the outbreak to distribute to parents.

AHS Public Health will maintain communication with the school over the course of the outbreak and continue to monitor school absenteeism rates to determine duration of outbreak. The school will be provided with AHS contact information should they have ongoing questions or concerns.

AHS Public Health will determine when additional outbreak control measures can be discontinued.

AHS Public Health will determine when the outbreak can be closed and will communicate this to the school.

### School Preparedness

Schools are encouraged to have a plan in place for if a student or staff member develops symptoms of illness while at school. Ill students /staff should be sent home where possible. An area away from others should be available for students while waiting to go home. If a student or staff member develops symptoms of respiratory illness (e.g., cough, fever, sore throat, runny nose not related to other conditions such as allergies or cold weather, loss of taste or smell, etc.), they should be provided with a mask to wear while waiting to go home.