

Provincial Population & Public Health  
Communicable Disease Control  
Safe Healthy Environments

# Guide for Outbreak Prevention & Control in Schools

Includes Respiratory, Gastrointestinal & Rash Illness

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- Incorrect information
- Spelling errors
- Inconsistencies

Submit feedback in an email to: [CDCResourceFeedback@share.albertahealthservices.ca](mailto:CDCResourceFeedback@share.albertahealthservices.ca).

Note: If you have questions about a specific outbreak, or site-specific processes, always direct your questions to your designated site lead or the AHS Public Health Outbreak Team investigator.

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## 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 other communicable diseases<sup>2</sup> under Section 26 of the Alberta [Public Health Act](#).

Alberta Health Services (AHS) collaborates with schools to prevent an outbreak of disease and responds when notified of potential outbreaks. This includes preventing the spread of respiratory, gastrointestinal (GI), rash, and any other unusual illnesses identified within a school.

Schools are recommended to take the following measures to prevent outbreaks and keep students and staff safe:

- Implement practices to stop the spread of illness, such as those outlined in the [general outbreak prevention practices](#) section.
- Develop policies to rapidly identify and manage students and staff with symptoms of illness.
- Promote high levels of environmental cleaning, respiratory etiquette, and hand hygiene.
- Notify PPHST as outlined in [reporting illness to PPHST](#).
- Comply, wherever possible, with all AHS recommendations.

### 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 of Alberta and eight Metis Settlements. We also acknowledge the many Indigenous communities that have been forged in urban centres across Alberta.

Schools and families have an important role in helping to stop the spread of illness. [Immunization](#) is an important public health measure, and all families, students and staff are encouraged to complete their routine immunizations, including COVID-19 and influenza. Both Influenza and COVID-19 vaccines are safe, effective and offer the best defense against serious illness. These vaccines are recommended for all individuals six months of age and older.

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## Scope

This guide is for the prevention, identification, reporting, and management of common communicable disease outbreaks in schools. If an outbreak is identified, the AHS Public Health Outbreak Team will recommend measures to manage the outbreak. This team includes zone Medical Officers of Health, Communicable Disease Control, and Environmental Public Health.

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

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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 an infected person or animal or the environment.

## General outbreak prevention practices

General outbreak prevention practices are important to stop the spread of all communicable diseases. Schools are recommended to routinely use the following prevention practices before, during and after an outbreak.

### Support a healthy environment

- Ensure frequent cleaning and disinfection of high touch surfaces. When cleaning and disinfecting, use appropriate products. Follow the [Public Health Recommendations for Environmental Cleaning of Public Facilities](#).
- Provide easy access to hand sanitizer and hand washing stations.
- Encourage [hand washing](#) for students and staff.
  - For more information see the [AHS IPC Hand Hygiene Resources](#).
- Encourage students and staff to practice [respiratory etiquette](#).
- Support students and staff who choose to wear a face mask.
- Improve the air quality in the school by optimizing ventilation systems.

### Prepare for illness

- Have a plan in place if a student or staff develops symptoms of illness at the school.
  - Send symptomatic staff home.
  - Contact parents/guardians to pick up symptomatic students as soon as possible using private transportation.
    - Keep symptomatic students in an area away from others while they wait to be picked up.
    - Students with respiratory symptoms are recommended to wear a face mask (if tolerated) to protect others.
    - Students with GI symptoms are recommended to use a dedicated washroom (if possible).
  - Have staff interacting with symptomatic students wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) such as a face mask and/or gloves.
- Have a plan that outlines cleaning and disinfection measures for group transportation.
- Familiarize staff with school policies regarding:
  - Attendance and illness
  - Monitoring and reporting students with symptoms of illness
  - [Hand washing](#), [respiratory etiquette](#), and [cleaning and disinfection](#).

### Monitor for illness

- Ask parents/guardians to watch their children daily for new symptoms of illness and keep them home if they are symptomatic.
- Ask staff to watch students for new symptoms of illness and follow the school illness plan if symptoms are identified.

### Plan a safe return

Share the following recommendations with staff and parents/guardians about when it is safe to return:

- **Respiratory Illness:** Stay home until all symptoms have improved, feeling well enough to resume normal activities, and be fever-free for 24 hours without using fever-reducing medications.
- **Gastrointestinal Illness:** Stay home until 48 hours after all symptoms have resolved.
- **Rash Illness:** Stay home for the length of time recommended by the AHS Public Health Outbreak Team. How long to stay home depends on the cause of the rash.

## Reporting illness to PPHST

### Illness surveillance

The AHS Public Health Outbreak Team identifies outbreaks by assessing symptoms and patterns of illness. Schools are responsible to:

- Monitor the number of ill students and their symptoms. This is called illness surveillance.
- Report to AHS Population Public Health Support Team (PPHST). See [Table A](#).

**Contact PPHST at 1-844-343-0971** to receive initial guidance and decision-making support. PPHST is a provincial, centralized outbreak reporting and response resource (formerly known as CEIR).

**Table A – Reporting illness to PPHST**

Schools notify PPHST at **1-844-343-0971** when the Reporting Criteria are met.

Type of Illness	Reporting Criteria
<b>Respiratory Illness</b>  or  <b>Gastrointestinal Illness</b>	<b>10% student absenteeism</b> due to illness <b>OR</b> an unusual amount of students with similar symptoms  <b>Symptoms:</b> 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  <b>Note:</b> Report an unusual increase in staff with GI illness (above the baseline of what would be expected) to PPHST, whether or not they were present at the school with symptoms. This could be an indicator of a GI outbreak.
<b>Rash Illness</b>	<b>Three or more</b> students with a similar rash illness within a <b>10-day period</b>
<b>Other Unusual Illness</b>	Report to PPHST if there are questions or concerns about other unusual illnesses.  Schools are recommended to call regarding diseases that may benefit from further advice and/or investigation. This includes measles, mumps, pertussis (whooping cough), meningitis, hepatitis, and any other illnesses of concern.

## Outbreak control measures

### Universal outbreak measures

PPHST will notify the AHS Public Health Outbreak Team if the **reporting criteria** in [Table A](#) are met. The AHS Public Health Outbreak Team will contact the school to discuss the illness details and determine if there is an outbreak.

**For respiratory illness outbreaks:** once the outbreak is open schools may direct questions to **1-833-592-2029** or email [CD\\_Outbreak\\_School\\_DayCare@albertahealthservices.ca](mailto:CD_Outbreak_School_DayCare@albertahealthservices.ca).

**For all other types of outbreaks,** use the contact information provided by the AHS Public Health Outbreak Team.

If an outbreak is declared, the AHS Public Health Outbreak Team will:

- Review the [general outbreak prevention practices](#).
- Provide information and recommendations to identify and prevent further spread of illness.
- Direct school to start [enhanced cleaning and disinfection](#).
- Discuss modifications for [shared transportation](#).

### Enhanced cleaning and disinfection

When an outbreak is declared, the school will enhance cleaning and disinfection. Below are some of the practices that will help reduce germs and prevent spread of illness.

- Increase frequency of daily cleaning and disinfection of common areas and surfaces. Pay particular attention to doorknobs, light switches, desktops, washrooms and other high-touch surfaces.
- Provide consistent reminders to students and staff about hand hygiene.
- Minimize the use of common or shared items (such as computers).
  - If shared use is necessary, clean and disinfect between groups.
- Allow water fountains to remain open only if they can be cleaned and disinfected frequently.

### Shared transportation

If a student becomes symptomatic on a trip using shared transportation, the school can:

- Recommend that the driver wear a face mask when driving a symptomatic student.
- Recommend that the driver contact the school.
- Provide a face mask for the symptomatic student if it is available and will be tolerated.
- Make arrangements for the symptomatic student to go home.
- If GI symptoms such as vomiting are present, recommend appropriate supplies to contain vomit and appropriate PPE and supplies to manage cleaning.
- Increase the frequency of cleaning and disinfection of the shared transport vehicle. This includes high-touch surfaces, such as door handles, rails, steering wheel, mobile devices, and GPS.

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## Additional outbreak measures

The AHS Public Health Outbreak Team will assess and monitor the outbreak in collaboration with school leadership. Depending on their assessment and the type of outbreak, additional outbreak measures may be recommended.

### General school measures

The AHS Public Health Outbreak Team may provide a letter for parents/guardians. This letter provides information about the outbreak and how to prevent the spread of illness.

- Schools are to use this letter to communicate with parents/guardians to ensure that accurate and up-to-date information is provided.

In collaboration with school leadership, the following additional measures may be recommended:

- Clean and disinfect shared items between students.
  - If shared items cannot be cleaned and disinfected (such as paper books and puzzles), they are recommended to be removed until the outbreak has ended.
- Postpone special events, performances or celebrations that involve bringing in family members and visitors.
- Postpone high-risk field trips and activities such as:
  - Crowded indoor venues
  - Overnight trips
  - Hands on activities with shared items
  - Multiple classes attending
  - Shared transport
  - Visits involving vulnerable populations (such as congregate care, hospital)
- Consider postponing other off-site activities.
- Move classes outdoors where possible (such as physical education).
- Minimize mixing different classes.
- Stay apart from others in common areas, if possible (such as hallways, washrooms).



## Ending an outbreak

The AHS Public Health Outbreak Team will determine when an outbreak is over and will advise when the control measures can be discontinued. The school is recommended to conduct a thorough enhanced cleaning and disinfection in all areas prior to returning to regular operations.

Schools are to resume [general outbreak prevention practices](#).