

Outbreak Control for Schools

Introduction

Parents, guardians and educational workers are aware that their children will come into contact with a variety of communicable diseases, particularly while they are attending school. Classrooms are ideal environments for the transmission of communicable diseases due to the close contact of students and sharing of materials. Educational workers are also at risk for contracting a communicable disease. In a school setting, the best method for preventing transmission is proper handwashing and hand sanitizing procedures. Other prevention measures can include staying at home when sick, cough/sneeze etiquette, avoid touching the face and receiving proper/ timely vaccines. In addition, shared surfaces should be kept clean and reduce contact with an infected person. The intent of the following material is to assist school board staff in outbreak scenarios and to provide guidance on when to contact the Health Department for additional resources.

Statutory Authority

Health Protection and Promotion Act, R.S.O., 1990, c. H.7, s.13, 22, and s. 28.
Designation of Diseases, Ontario Regulation 135/18, under the authority of the Health Protection and Promotion Act.

Legislative Role

All schools are required to report a communicable disease, suspected enteric or respiratory outbreak to their local health department.

Duty of school Principal to report Disease: “The Principal of the school who is of the opinion that a pupil of the school who has or may have a communicable disease shall, as soon as possible after forming the opinion, report thereon to the medical officer of health of the health unit in which the school is located. R.S.O 1990, c.H.7, s.28”

Goal

To control and prevent the occurrence of an outbreak of illness caused by a communicable disease in schools.

Objectives

- To respond to suspected and/or declared enteric and respiratory outbreaks occurring in a school as soon as possible.
- To determine the extent of the outbreak in terms of time, place and cases
- To identify the causative agent, its source, method of spread and contributing factor(s)
- To implement infection and outbreak control measures within a timely manner and for the duration of the outbreak

Background

Enteric illnesses are the same as gastrointestinal illnesses. In general, signs and symptoms of enteric illnesses include diarrhea, which may be accompanied by abdominal cramps, stomach aches, fever, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, bloody and/or watery stools. It is important to determine whether the diarrhea may be a reaction to medication, change in diet or other reasons that may not be linked to an enteric illness.

A respiratory infection usually starts with the onset of a fever and may be accompanied with one or more of the following: runny nose, cough, nasal congestion, sore throat, chills, muscle aches, malaise, poor appetite, and young children may also have diarrhea.

Daily attendance/surveillance of students and monitoring any enteric and/or respiratory symptoms will give a clear picture of the baseline incidence of illness in the school. The clustering of cases characterized by common symptoms indicated by an increase in the level of illness above the baseline incidence in a relatively short time will suggest an enteric or respiratory outbreak may be occurring. **This is the time that the health department must be notified of the suspected outbreak.** Early reporting of a suspected outbreak along with the strict implementation of specific infection control measures in collaboration with the custodial staff will decrease the number of children/staff that could get sick and will reduce the duration of the outbreak.

Once the health department is notified of the suspected outbreak, the investigating Public Health Inspector (PHI) from the Infectious Disease Prevention and Control (IDPC) program will initiate an outbreak investigation. If an outbreak investigation is initiated, close communication between the school's principal, designate or lead custodian and the PHI will be required to ensure a proper assessment is done as soon as possible.

Identifying an Outbreak

A suspected outbreak exists when there is an increase in the normal/baseline incidence of illness, indicating a higher number of students or staff who are sick with similar symptoms than expected. To determine if a suspected outbreak exists, you should:

- Identify similar symptoms of illness among the sick students/staff
- Check recent child/staff absenteeism records and confirm with parents if students are sick at home
- Contact Durham Region Health Department (DRHD) as soon as possible and discuss the unusual clustering of symptoms. The designated PHI will work with the school to declare an outbreak if necessary. It is the schools' responsibility to recognize, record and report suspected outbreaks to the Durham Health Connection Line immediately at 905-668-2020 or 1-800-841-2729 to leave a message for a Public Health Inspector

Health Department's Role in Outbreak Control

The Health Department has three major roles related to the investigation of a communicable disease, suspected enteric or respiratory outbreak in a school.

1. Legislated Role

The Health Department's Medical Officer of Health and Public Health Inspectors have the authority to require:

- The exclusion of ill students/staff from school
- Students/staff to submit specimens for testing (i.e. stool)
- The facility to follow specific outbreak control measures
- The facility to close (only in extreme conditions and always in consultation with the school)

2. Consulting Role

The Health Department will provide advice on:

- Signs and symptoms of enteric and respiratory illness
- Information about communicable germs capable of causing enteric and respiratory illness
- How to reduce the spread of communicable germs (infection control measures)
- How to obtain and store required specimens for testing

3. Coordinating Role

DRHD will help to coordinate necessary steps to control the outbreak by:

- identifying the type and number of specimens to be collected for lab submission
- possibly deliver enteric outbreak specimen kits to ill staff and children at home
- ensuring specimens collected are transported to the Public Health Laboratory for testing in a timely manner
- informing the student or guardian of student, laboratory results for specimens submitted
- recommending and/or ensuring the implementation of specific outbreak infection control measures

School Boards Role in Outbreak Control

All schools are responsible for reporting a communicable disease, suspected enteric or respiratory outbreak to the health department. Once the suspected outbreak has been reported, the school is required to:

- Immediately report changes or provide updated information about the outbreak to the PHI
- Fax daily reports about new and resolved cases using the **Outbreak Line Listing Form** (DUHEV-303) that will be provided to the school upon contact
- Post signage at all entrances to the school e.g. health department outbreak notification poster, also known as **STOP** sign (DUHEV-417)
- Follow all health department outbreak control measures, requirements and recommendations
- Communicate necessary information to the parents/guardians of children and staff e.g. outbreak notification to parents/guardians
- Enforce 48 hour symptom free policy or as otherwise directed for students/ staff in order to return to facility
- At school boards discretion, request parents/guardians to get a doctor's note confirming that an illness is not communicable for any child returning to the centre but still exhibiting symptoms of infection e.g. rashes, eye infections, etc.

Outbreak Control Package for Schools

An **Outbreak Control Package for School Boards** has been included in this document to assist in the effective and consistent management of enteric and respiratory outbreaks in schools. The investigating PHI will complete the package with the assistance of the Principal, designate or lead Custodian of the school, although some sections of the package are for use by the school.

Outbreak control in schools requires a coordinated effort by everyone involved. The implementation of common sense outbreak control measures such as adequate hand hygiene, exclusion of symptomatic students and staff, etc. will help to reduce the impact of the outbreak in the school. A consistent and coordinated approach to the principles of outbreak control among this group will help to quickly identify and control communicable disease outbreaks.

For more information, contact the Durham Health Connection Line at 905-668-2020 or 1-800-841-2729 to leave a message for a Public Health Inspector.