



# Guidance for Respiratory Illness Prevention and Management in Schools

## Overview

Routine public health practices can minimize transmission of respiratory infections, including COVID-19, influenza and common colds. These practices include: proper hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette, enhanced cleaning and disinfecting, maintaining ventilation, staying home when sick and getting vaccinated.

The guidance provided in this document is intended to support schools and school authority leaders in reducing the risk of transmission of these illnesses and infections among students, staff and visitors by providing options to integrate good public health practices into normal operations under the 2021-22 School Year Plan.

Schools and school authorities are strongly encouraged to use strategies from this guidance to establish their own plans to reduce transmission of COVID-19, influenza as well as other infections in the school setting. Individuals should also assess and manage their personal risk, which may include using additional precautions such as continuing to use a face mask, in order to serve their individual needs. School authorities continue to have the ability and corresponding accountability for any local measures that are put in place, such as physical distancing, cohorting and masking requirements that may exceed provincial guidance.

Alberta Health Services (AHS) Zone Medical Officers of Health (MOHs) and their designates are available to support school authorities throughout the province. Their role is to provide guidance on communicable disease risk as well as risk management. If you have concerns, need specific guidance, or have questions about how to apply the measures in this document, or additional measures based on local context, please contact Environmental Public Health in your Zone for assistance (see Appendix A).

## Core Public Health Preventative Measures

### Vaccines

- All eligible staff and students should be encouraged to be fully vaccinated for respiratory illnesses, where applicable, such as COVID-19 and influenza.
- The annual influenza vaccine is available to all Albertans six months and older beginning every fall.
- All staff and students born in 2009 or prior are eligible to receive COVID-19 vaccine.
- At this time, children born in 2010 or later are not currently eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine.
- It is important for those who are eligible to get vaccinated to reduce the risk to the broader community and those who are unable to receive the vaccine at this time.

### Environmental measures

- HVAC systems should be maintained in accordance with manufacturer operational guidelines.
- Open windows and doors where possible to increase air circulation and encourage outdoor activities, when weather permits.
- Schools should have procedures that outline routine cleaning requirements, including regular cleaning and disinfecting of high touch surfaces.

### Staying home when sick

- Before leaving home, staff (including substitute teachers), students (or their caregivers) and visitors, should assess whether they feel well enough to attend school for any reason.
  - Parents/guardians should assess their children daily for any new signs or symptoms of COVID-19 using the [Alberta Health Daily Checklist](#).

- Anyone that reports COVID-19 symptoms is directed to stay home, seek health care advice as appropriate (e.g., call Health Link 811, or their primary health care practitioner), and fill out the [AHS Online Self-Assessment tool](#) to determine if they should be tested.
- For information on isolation for staff and students with symptoms, or for confirmed COVID-19 cases, please see Appendix B.
- Anyone who feels unwell with other symptoms should stay at home until they are well.

## Hand hygiene

- Consider ways to promote and facilitate frequent and proper hand hygiene for all students, staff and visitors, such as:
  - Providing soap and running water or hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol.
  - Placing hand sanitizer in convenient locations throughout the school where soap and water may not be available or nearby, such as in entrances, exits and near high touch surfaces.
  - Promoting hand hygiene before/after activities (e.g., entering/leaving school or classroom, boarding/exiting the bus, changing activities, before and after using shared equipment, before and after eating or serving food, after using washrooms, before and after having physical contact with other staff or students, etc.).
  - Giving verbal reminders for hand hygiene and posting signs. Schools can download posters at [alberta.ca/returntoschool](http://alberta.ca/returntoschool)
  - If parents have questions about their child using alcohol-based hand sanitizer they should contact their school administration to discuss potential alternatives.

## Respiratory etiquette

- Encourage students, staff and visitors to use proper respiratory etiquette (e.g., sneezing into the elbow or a tissue, discarding tissues immediately into a lined bin, performing hand hygiene).
  - Have information available (e.g., signs) for individuals on these practices, as needed.
- Schools should support students, staff and visitors in their choice to wear a mask. Students, parents/guardians, staff and visitors should consider their own risk of acquiring COVID-19, influenza and other respiratory illnesses when making decisions on wearing a mask.
- Students, teachers, staff and visitors must follow provincial requirements for masks.
  - Masks remain mandatory for students, teachers, staff members and visitors on school buses and publicly accessible transit, such as municipal buses, taxis and ride-shares.
  - Exceptions to the mask requirement on school buses are listed in CMOH Order 34-2021.

## Responding to Illness

### Symptomatic students and staff

- Schools are encouraged to have a plan in place if a student or staff member develops any symptoms of illness while at school. This can include:
  - Sending home students or staff who are sick, where possible.
  - Having a separate area for students and staff who are sick.
- A staff member caring for an ill student should consider wearing a mask.
- If a student or staff member begins developing new symptoms of respiratory illness (e.g., cough, fever, sore throat, runny nose, loss of taste or smell, etc.), they should be provided with a mask to wear while waiting to go home.
- For information on isolation for staff and students with symptoms, or for confirmed COVID-19 cases, see Appendix B.
- Proof of a negative COVID-19 test result is not necessary for a student or staff member to return to school.
  - Individuals should not return to the school until they are feeling well.

### Confirmed cases of COVID-19

- AHS Public Health will not inform school authorities or administrators of individual cases of COVID-19 within their school setting, as notification to the school is not required for the individual's case management.
- Staff, students or parents/guardians may choose to notify school administrators of a positive COVID-19 test result.
  - Individuals are not required to share their COVID-19 test results with school administration.
- School administrators and/or school authorities are not required to contact AHS to report student or staff cases.

- School administrators should continue to monitor their school population for additional cases (e.g., an individual voluntarily shares they are positive for COVID or they start to experience COVID-19 symptoms while at the school) and/or absenteeism due to illness.

### **Reporting and responding to high rates of absenteeism**

- If there is a school-wide absence rate of 10% or greater due to illness OR there are an unusual amount of individuals with similar symptoms, report to AHS Coordinated Early Identification Response (CEIR) team at 1-844-343-0971, regardless of the schools' participation in Alberta Real Time Syndromic Surveillance Network (ARTSSN).
  - The purpose of this reporting is to continue to monitor for clusters of respiratory or gastrointestinal illness and alert AHS to potential disease outbreaks.
- Where absenteeism of 10% or greater has been identified by AHS due to illness, AHS may declare an outbreak and recommend additional voluntary measures to reduce ongoing transmission for the duration of the outbreak, generally 14 days from when the outbreak was declared, unless absenteeism continues to increase.
  - Additional recommendations may include active health screening with questionnaires, increasing frequency of cleaning and disinfection, maintaining cohorts, mask recommendations, and/or limiting group/extra-curricular activities.
  - A Medical Officer of Health (MOH)/designate has the authority under the *Public Health Act* to recommend additional public health measures if they identify an unacceptable risk in a specific circumstance. Please follow all guidance and recommendations provided by the MOH/designate.

# Appendix A: Environmental Public Health Contacts

## Alberta Health Services

Portal link: <https://ephisahs.albertahealthservices.ca/create-case/>

ZONE	CONTACT EMAIL ADDRESS	PHONE NUMBERS FOR MAIN OFFICE
Calgary Zone	<a href="mailto:calgaryzone.environmentalhealth@ahs.ca">calgaryzone.environmentalhealth@ahs.ca</a>	Calgary 403-943-2288
Central Zone	<a href="mailto:centralzone.environmentalhealth@ahs.ca">centralzone.environmentalhealth@ahs.ca</a>	Red Deer 403-356-6366
Edmonton Zone	<a href="mailto:edmontonzone.environmentalhealth@ahs.ca">edmontonzone.environmentalhealth@ahs.ca</a>	Edmonton 780-735-1800
North Zone	<a href="mailto:northzone.environmentalhealth@ahs.ca">northzone.environmentalhealth@ahs.ca</a>	Grande Prairie 780-513-7517
South Zone	<a href="mailto:she.southzoneeph@ahs.ca">she.southzoneeph@ahs.ca</a>	Lethbridge 403-388-6689

## Indigenous Services Canada – First Nations and Inuit Health Branch

OFFICE	REGULAR BUSINESS HOURS	
	8:00 AM – 4:00 PM	
Edmonton	Environmental Public Health	780-495-4409
Tsuut'ina	Environmental Public Health	403-299-3939

# Appendix B: Management of Symptomatic Individuals and Individuals Tested for COVID-19

Symptoms	COVID-19 Test Result:	Management of Individual:
Symptomatic	Positive	Isolate for a minimum 10 days or until symptoms have improved AND no fever for 24 hours, without the use of fever-reducing medications, whichever is longer.
	Negative	Stay home until symptoms resolve.
	Not tested	<p><b>Student:</b> If symptoms include fever, cough, shortness of breath or loss of sense of taste/smell: Isolate for a minimum for 10 days or until symptoms have improved AND afebrile for 24 hours, without the use of fever-reducing medications, whichever is longer.</p> <p><b>Adult:</b> If symptoms include fever, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat or runny nose: Isolate for a minimum for 10 days or until symptoms have improved AND afebrile for 24 hours, without the use of fever-reducing medications, whichever is longer.</p> <p><b>Student:</b> If other symptoms (chills, sore throat/painful swallowing, runny nose/congestion, feeling unwell/fatigued, nausea/vomiting/diarrhea, unexplained loss of appetite, muscle/joint aches, headache or conjunctivitis):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ONE symptom: stay home, monitor for 24h. If improves, return when well enough to go (testing not necessary).</li> <li>• TWO symptoms OR ONE symptom that persists or worsens: Stay home until symptom(s) resolve (testing recommended but not required).</li> </ul> <p><b>Adult:</b> If other symptoms, stay home until symptoms resolve.</p>
Asymptomatic	Positive	Isolate for a minimum of 10 days from the collection date of the swab.
	Negative	No isolation required.