

## COVID-19: Guidelines for Principals, Directors and Division Staff

There is currently no widespread community-based transmission of COVID-19 in Canada. As such, school closures are not recommended for the prevention of COVID-19 at this time. The [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) (PHAC) does recommend all schools take standard respiratory illness precautions—the same precautions recommended for cold and influenza season every year. EIPS will continue to update recommendations as new information about the virus becomes available.

Symptoms associated with COVID-19 are similar to many common respiratory illnesses that circulate through schools and childcare settings. Key strategies to prevent and control respiratory viruses, such as COVID-19, include:

- Students, children and staff who are ill with a fever or other infectious respiratory symptoms should stay home from school and childcare centres.
- Everyone should consistently practise proper respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene.
- Regular and routine environmental cleaning of facilities should take place.

Currently, Alberta public health officials are recommending the following actions as a precaution:

- Avoid all cruise ship travel because of the COVID-19 pandemic. If you are planning a trip, before you leave, consult the Government of Canada travel advisory website to ensure you have the most up-to-date information about possible risks.
- Anyone over the age of 65, and those with chronic health conditions, not travel outside Canada. Even Albertans who are not in these risk groups should think carefully about their travel plans, and the possibility they may be exposed to the virus while travelling.
- If a student or staff member travelled on the *Grand Princess* cruise ship, or to Italy, Iran or China's Hubei province in the last 14 days to self-isolate for two weeks—even if feeling well.
- Anyone who has travelled to mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea or Italy in the last two weeks should monitor themselves for symptoms such as a fever or cough—with students getting help from their parents. Monitoring should take place daily for up to 14 days after their last visit. Also, if staff, students or family members are in contact with someone who visited these locations and diagnosed with the novel coronavirus, call [Health Link 811](#) for further instructions.
- The most likely cause of fever or cough is the common virus influenza. However, anyone who feels sick and has travelled to the above locations, in the last 14 days, should stay home and away from others. They should also call [Health Link 811](#) about potential testing and followup, and inform the Principal.
- Direct parents and staff to call [Health Link 811](#) for additional precautions and followup testing if a child, family member or close contact travelled anywhere outside of Canada and:
  - was in contact with someone suspected of, or confirmed as, having the novel coronavirus;
  - was at a health-care facility; or
  - has symptoms such as cough or fever.

If a student or staff member does not meet the exposure criteria above, they do not need to stay away from school. They also likely do not meet the requirements for COVID-19 testing. Asking a student or staff member for a doctor's note confirming they aren't infected isn't necessary. For more health-related questions or concerns, call [Health Link at 811](#).

## **What else can schools and worksites do?**

### **Practice good hand hygiene**

Washing hands regularly with plain soap and water is recommended in all schools and childcare settings. The mechanical action is effective for removing visible soil and microbes. Where possible, use a tissue or paper towel to turn off taps and open doors after washing. Keep waste cans near the washroom exit doors for the disposal of tissues and towels.

When handwashing sinks aren't available, supervised use of hand sanitizers may be considered. If hands are visibly soiled, hand sanitizers aren't as effective at eliminating respiratory viruses.

#### [Additional Information About Hand Hygiene](#)

In addition to existing sinks, schools should offer hand-sanitizing stations such as wall-mounted hand sanitizer dispensers. Schools and childcare facilities should also ensure:

- extra paper towels and waste receptacles are made available;
- hand sanitizer and secured dispensers—provided to supplement handwashing facilities—are located in supervised areas; and
- waste cans are located near washroom exit doors for disposal of towels or tissues used to turn taps on and off.

### **Maintain good respiratory etiquette**

Respiratory etiquette in school and childcare settings include covering the mouth and nose during coughing or sneezing with a tissue or a flexed elbow. Dispose of the tissues in a plastic-lined waste container, followed by good [hand hygiene](#).

### **Reinforce "no sharing" policies**

Reinforce "no food sharing" policies in school settings. Though these policies are generally put in place to reduce potential exposures to allergens, the practice of not sharing food in schools and childcare settings supports the efforts of reducing virus transmission between children.

To prevent the spread of respiratory viruses, water bottles used by sports teams should not be shared among athletes. Mouthpieces on musical instruments, especially on those used by more than one student, should be cleaned and disinfected as per standard practices recommended for the instrument. When feasible, students should have their mouthpieces.

Schools can consider having students fill water bottles instead of drinking from fountains. Many schools have water bottle filling stations installed at various locations. Also, schools using shared pinnies for sport activities should wash after each use.

Schools operating fitness centres, follow the guidelines for [Fitness Centre Cleaning](#). During an illness outbreak these areas may need to be shut down temporarily—at the discretion of the Principal. For additional information about cleaning shared equipment, such as toys, consult EIPS' [Cleaning for Infection Control](#)

### **Reinforce social distancing strategies**

Consider temporarily limiting unnecessary school- or work-based travel and large-group activities. These include sports tournaments; music and field trips in the community or to other schools; professional learning and activity days; and school-break day camps. Unless otherwise directed by Alberta Health Services or the Superintendent, these decisions can be made on a school-by-school basis at the discretion of the principal.

### **Keep parents, caregivers and staff informed**

Parents and caregivers are a major source of comfort and reassurance to children. As such, it's important schools keep families informed about steps being taken to protect children, such as preventing the spread of respiratory infections. Schools should also communicate what families can do at home, including reinforcing good hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette, undertaking environmental cleaning and providing increased reassurance.

Parents and caregivers are the ones who make decisions about keeping their child home if they are sick. As such, open and frequent communication with parents is an important part of ensuring sick children aren't sent to school.

### **Support those individuals who are self-monitoring for symptoms, or self-isolating**

If students or staff are advised by public health to self-monitor for symptoms or self-isolate at home because of illness or returning from travel to an [affected area](#), the school community should make efforts to support families, including:

- being as flexible as necessary with school attendance;
- treating families with respect, fairness and compassion with a focus on dignity and protection of privacy;
- taking steps to reduce the potential for stigma and discrimination—for example, through outreach, information sharing, and school and division-level education;
- putting measures in place for students who are self-isolating at home to undertake meaningful homework—to help ensure they don't fall behind in their studies and maintain a sense of connection;
- considering flexible and relaxed approaches to work that's missed because of self-isolation or illness;
- putting measures in place for families self-monitoring for symptoms that help them recognize those symptoms and keep infected individuals separated from staff and students.

## Implement a protocol for managing students and staff with flu-like symptoms or possible COVID-19

If a student or staff member, who is self-monitoring, begins to experience symptoms of the flu or COVID-19 while attending a school or childcare program, it's recommended to:

- Promptly separate students and staff who show symptoms from others in a supervised area until they can go home. In addition, anyone who is required to provide care to the student should ensure a two-metres distance between them and the ill person.
- Practice good hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette while the ill person is waiting to be picked up or transported.
- Provide tissues for the student to ensure good respiratory etiquette. Proper disposal of the tissue and hand hygiene should occur after coughing or sneezing. Ensure appropriate environmental cleaning of the space the student occupied once departed.
- If a two-metre distance can't be maintained between the ill student or staff, contact the school health nurse for advice to prevent or limit virus transmission to those providing care. For additional advice, visit the Government of Canada's [Public health management of cases and contacts associated with novel coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#).
- Have protocols in place to notify parents and guardians if a child shows symptoms of COVID-19 while at school or in childcare—including the need for immediate pickup. It's important for schools, in consultation with the school health nurse, to ensure the appropriate mode of transportation is used—ambulance or private vehicle—and other precautions are followed during transit. Avoid public transit and school buses.
- Avoid putting sick students back on a school bus—discuss with Alberta Health Services before taking this step. Students who begin to show symptoms of COVID-19 and have no other transportation options should sit on a seat by themselves, at least two-metres away from other students and be provided with tissues. Also, inform the student about what's expected of them while on the school bus.
- For those without symptoms, masks aren't recommended for protection. Those working in schools aren't typically trained on mask use. There's also a potential risk of infection with improper use and disposal. For young children, masks are often irritating and can lead to increased touching of the face and eyes.
- Students and staff who are experiencing symptoms of respiratory illness should stay home.
- Schools will notify staff and parents about any confirmed cases of COVID-19 impacting a school or worksite, and advise of the implemented precautions.

### Reporting to Alberta Health Services

Administrators need to observe and know the usual absenteeism patterns of their school. Notify Alberta Health Services in outbreaks or other unusual situations—student absenteeism greater than 10 per cent or severe illness. Alberta Health Services can provide advice on the implementation of measures specific to COVID-19 beyond what is standard respiratory disease prevention protocol, including the separation or exclusion of affected students and staff from the school. If there is an illness outbreak or confirmed case of COVID-19, the Division will implement its Guidelines for School Illness Outbreaks.

## Follow EIPS cleaning and disinfecting protocols

It's not yet known how long the COVID-19 virus lives on surfaces. Preliminary findings suggest it can survive on objects and surfaces anywhere from a few hours to a few days. Regularly cleaning and disinfecting objects and high-touch surfaces will help prevent the transmission of viruses. EIPS is reinforcing these protocols with its custodial contractors. Staff should increase their monitoring of hand-cleaning supplies to ensure all sinks in washrooms, kitchens and classrooms remain well-stocked with soap and paper towel. Facility Services is currently working with the Division's primary suppliers to ensure it has the safest and most effective cleaning and disinfecting products on hand.

Principals are encouraged to review existing cleaning needs in their schools to help determine where increased cleaning is beneficial. Contact the Facility Service Centre if assistance is required.

Administrators and staff should follow the [EIPS Guidelines for Cleaning and Disinfection](#), as posted on StaffConnect. For additional resources review EIPS' [Infection Control Information](#). Schools can ask the custodian to dispense EIPS-approved products for this purpose for use by staff only. Contact the Facility Service Centre if additional assistance is required.

As per standard procedures, it's recommended school and childcare programs have toys that are easy to clean and disinfect—avoid plush toys. It may be prudent to increase cleaning frequency, especially when there's an increased level of illness among children attending class or childcare centres.

**High-Touch Surfaces:** It's recommended high-touch objects and surfaces such as pencil sharpeners, water-fountain knobs and push buttons, doorknobs, faucet handles are cleaned and disinfected regularly. Custodians routinely do this, but during an illness outbreak school staff are encouraged to assist whenever possible. Staff are responsible for cleaning and disinfecting shared educational-related equipment such as toys, electronics, keyboards and fitness equipment. Products can be dispensed by the custodian into labelled spray bottles for staff use only. Follow the guidelines for Cleaning and Disinfection posted on StaffConnect.

There is no clear evidence to suggest that water fountains spouts are a major source of virus transmission. However, they are cleaned regularly by custodians, as per the Division's high-touch surface cleaning protocols. During an illness outbreak, fountains may be temporarily turned off and bottled water provided to the school.

**Cleaning and Disinfection Products:** EIPS uses commercial-cleaning and disinfection products that are safe, environmentally friendly and effective for a range of germs and viruses. The products allowed at a Division school or worksite are ones approved for use by EIPS. If staff want to temporarily bring in their own products, check with the Principal and EIPS' Occupational Health and Safety Specialist first to ensure the product is safe to use in a school environment. During an outbreak situation some flexibility may be permitted.

At home, cleaning surfaces and objects with water and household detergents or common disinfectant products are sufficient in most cases. If a household or commercial disinfectant cleaning products are not readily available, disinfect hard surfaces with a mixture of one-part bleach—five per cent sodium hypochlorite—and nine-parts water. Ensure the solution contacts the surface for one minute.

## Psychosocial considerations

A new virus such as COVID-19 can create anxiety and is difficult for students and children to understand. It's especially difficult if someone in their school or family is sick, or they see or hear troubling messages on the radio, internet or television.

It's normal for students and staff to feel worried or nervous and have questions. Communication should reflect the diverse linguistic, literacy and cultural characteristics and needs of the students and their families. Schools need to monitor for discrimination or bullying surrounding COVID-19, toward those who may have been exposed to the virus, are self-isolating at home or are self-monitoring for symptoms. Schools should make all efforts to correct misinformation and adhere to anti-discrimination and anti-bullying protocols.

School staff need to pay attention to children's feelings and reactions. The way the situation is handled strongly affects how children respond. The National Public Radio has created a [three-minute podcast and foldable comic](#) to share with students in the classroom.

## Provide reassurance

Reassure students about their safety and health. Tell children it's OK to be concerned, it's comforting. Assure them they are safe, and there are many things they can do to stay healthy:

- **Handwashing:** Wash hands often with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds or use hand sanitizer, especially after coughing or sneezing. Turn off taps and open doors with a tissue or towel.
- **Practicing good cough and sneeze etiquette:** Cough and sneeze into your arm or tissue.
- **Stay home when sick:** Children should tell parents if they don't feel well, and together, make a plan to stay home from school.
- **Keep clean:** Keep hands away from face and mouth.
- **Stay healthy:** Stay healthy by eating well, keeping physically active and getting enough sleep.

## Listen to students

Students want to be heard and to talk about their feelings. They do not need detailed information about events. Let them know they can ask questions. Answer questions honestly, making sure the information is suitable for their age level.

If you don't know the answer to their question, it's OK to say so and together look for resources that provide accurate information. Remember, students are often listening when you talk to others about COVID-19. Administrators and staff should be mindful of how students share information in less-supervised settings such as before and after school, lunch and snack times, recess and on the bus. It's important for administrators and staff to correct any misinformation as they become aware of it.

## Maintain routines

Maintain familiar activities and routines at schools and childcare programs as doing so can reinforce a sense of security for students and staff.

**Pay attention to what students are reading and hearing from the media**

Limit media exposure or ensure information accessed online is reputable. Exposure to excessive amounts of media coverage can give students an exaggerated view of the risks associated with COVID-19. Limit exposure in younger students as this becomes more difficult as they get older.

Explain the events and help put information into perspective. Keep students informed about what is happening—and what may happen—at a level that is suitable for their age.

For staff, a new module on COVID-19 is available on the Hour Zero training platform.

Do not rely on non-government sources, as misinformation abounds on the internet. The best sources for information on COVID-19 are the following agencies.

- [Alberta Health](#)
- [Public Health Agency of Canada](#)
- [World Health Organization](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control](#)