

FAQs for Outbreaks in Schools

What is an outbreak and why must they be reported?

An increase in the number of disease illnesses beyond what is expected for a specific area or time can indicate an outbreak. Quickly reporting and responding to these outbreaks will help to prevent further spread of the diseases.

Are schools required to report outbreaks?

Yes, outbreaks in any setting are immediately reportable by law per the Reportable Disease Rule (64 CSR-7). All West Virginia schools (public and private) are required to report infectious disease outbreaks to their local health department.

What are the typical kinds of outbreaks that occur in schools?

The two most common outbreaks are respiratory and/or gastrointestinal illnesses. The cause of an outbreak may be unknown but an increase in absenteeism with students/staff reporting similar symptoms should always be reported as an outbreak.

How do I know if there is an outbreak in my school?

For school-wide illnesses, the baseline rate, or the "normal" absentee rate expected during a typical school year due to illness when there is no active outbreak, would need to be known. Any school absentee rate greater than the baseline rate (or 15% or more absenteeism when the baseline rate is unknown) can indicate an outbreak and should be reported.

- Calculate the school absentee rate by using, $(\text{the total number of students absent for the day}) / (\text{the total number of students enrolled}) \times 100 = \text{current absentee rate}$.

A call down should be completed to determine the potential cause of illness. See the [School Outbreak Resources webpage](#) for more information on how to perform a call down.

For small settings such as individual classroom, sports teams, activity groups, etc.

- Respiratory Illness (RSV, COVID, Influenza, etc.): Three or more epi-linked laboratory-confirmed (Rapid or PCR) cases identified within seven days OR five or more epi-linked cases of acute respiratory illness with no lab testing.
- Gastrointestinal Illness: Three or more epi-linked cases identified within a 24-hour period.

How do I report an outbreak?

All outbreaks should be reported immediately to the local health department. If the local health department is unavailable, contact the state health department 24/7 on-call Epidemiologist at 304-558-5358.

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What information is needed when reporting an outbreak?

School-wide outbreaks: The outbreak can be monitored by student absenteeism and diagnosis/symptoms. Report total census information and the current absentee rate for students (see above for school absenteeism rate calculation for a school-wide outbreak).

Small-setting outbreaks: Schools should provide the name of the class/group, the number of ill students and staff, and the first illness onset date. In the case of sports teams or other extracurricular groups, dates of any contact with other school teams or groups should be reported as well.

What happens after I report an outbreak

The local health department will provide outbreak guidance, including control measures and resources, to help control the spread of disease. Schools should provide weekly updates to their local health department. The local health department will determine when an outbreak meets criteria to close.

Do we need to close the school?

Schools should stay open as long as they can maintain a safe environment and have adequate staff. A local health department may recommend temporarily closing the school if rapid and uncontrolled transmission occurs.

What can my school do to prevent outbreaks from happening?

Just a few simple actions can greatly reduce the spread of diseases in schools.

- Routine cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting surfaces and objects that are touched often, such as desks, countertops, doorknobs, computer keyboards, hands-on learning items, faucet handles, phones, and toys.
- Teach and reinforce proper handwashing.
- Teach and reinforce respiratory etiquette to reduce the spread of respiratory viruses.
- Promote vaccination and, if possible, facilitate vaccinations by hosting school-located vaccination clinics, or connect eligible children, students, teachers, staff, and families to off-site vaccination locations.

Where can I get more information?

1. Preventing Spread of Infections in K-12 Schools. CDC Guidance.
www.cdc.gov/orr/school-preparedness/infection-prevention/index.html
2. School outbreak toolkits. WV Office of Epidemiology and Prevention Services Guidance.
oeps.wv.gov/atoz/Pages/School-Outbreaks.aspx