



INFORMATION ON DISEASE OUTBREAKS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SERVICES

From time to time your Early Childhood Education (ECE) service may experience an outbreak of illness amongst the children. Staff may also become unwell; children can also take the illness home and spread it to family and whanau. Most of the outbreaks in these settings are due to gastrointestinal (GI) illnesses where children suffer from diarrhoea and/or vomiting. Occasionally, outbreaks may be due to influenza-like illnesses, e.g. pandemic flu, or vaccine-related diseases, e.g. measles. This information sheet has been developed to assist ECE services manage an outbreak of illness in their centre.

WHAT IS AN OUTBREAK?

Outbreaks can generally be defined as one or more of the following:

- A rise in the number of children or staff absent due to a similar illness above what you would usually expect
- Where two or more 'related' (e.g. same age group, room) children and/or staff develop similar signs and symptoms of illness or infection within a certain time period
- Two or more laboratory-confirmed cases of an illness or infection within the centre within a certain time period

It is important that staff are always on the lookout for signs of illness and outbreaks in their centre. This disease surveillance role is very important for detecting outbreaks early on and allowing management practices can be put in place as soon as possible to limit the spread of illness.

Early detection of signs of illness is very important so staff should be alert to the following categories of symptoms:

- Diarrhoea
- Vomiting
- Fever
- Cough
- Rash

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I SUSPECT THERE IS AN OUTBREAK IN MY CENTRE?

If you suspect that you may have a disease outbreak within your centre, contact your local Public Health Service as soon as possible. Public Health staff will assist you to control and manage the outbreak as well as investigating the source or causative agent.

The main objectives during outbreak control and management are:

- to identify the potential source or cause of the illness
- to reduce illness
- to reduce the spread of the organism within and outside the ECE service
- to reduce the probability of re-infection
- to help prevent future occurrence

Role of the Early Childhood Education Service

- Notify your local Public Health Service of increased occurrence of illness among children/staff at the centre.
- Notify the parents/caregivers/whanau of any outbreak or potential outbreak.
- Assist Public Health staff during the investigation and the implementation of control measures.
- Distribute educational materials and information.
- Maintain a record ('case log') of sick and recovering children and staff.
- Exclude individuals who need to be excluded as instructed by Public Health staff.

Role of the Local Public Health Service

- Advise the Early Childhood Education Officer at the local Ministry of Education office of the outbreak.
- Conduct an outbreak investigation.
- Provide advice and resources to the centre on outbreak control measures.
- Monitor illness records, control measures and compliance with recommendations daily.
- Collect environmental and/or clinical specimens where required and submit specimens for testing.
- Provide relevant illness information to parents, ECE management and staff.
- Distribute information about specific outbreaks and outbreak prevention in the community.

OUTBREAK CONTROL AND MANAGEMENT MEASURES

There are a number of measures that will need to be implemented or enhanced during an outbreak event to control the spread of illness within a centre. These should be reflected in your centre's illness/health and safety policies and procedures. Measures include:

Isolation and Exclusion

- If a child falls ill whilst attending the centre, isolate the child immediately and contact a parent/guardian to collect the child as soon as possible.
- Exclude **all** symptomatic individuals (including staff) until symptom-free for the recommended period. Cases of illness **must** be excluded from the centre until they are no longer able to pass the illness onto others. The time an individual will need to stay away will vary depending on the disease/infection involved. Public Health staff working with you on the outbreak will be able to provide direction on this.
- If the outbreak in the centre involves a vaccine-preventable disease, e.g. measles, Public Health staff may recommend excluding unimmunised children from attending the centre for a certain time period. It is vital that immunisation registers are kept up-to-date for this purpose.

Hygiene

- Good personal hygiene practices must be reinforced with children, their parents/caregivers/whanau and staff members. This includes good hand washing and drying techniques, cough and sneeze etiquette, covering moist skin conditions, avoiding sharing of spit, etc.

- Increase hand washing for children and staff, especially before eating and/or preparing food, and after going to the toilet or nappy changing. Children should be supervised and/or assisted with hand washing and drying.
- Protective clothing and/or equipment must be worn where contact with contaminated material, e.g. vomit, faeces, is likely. This may include disposable gloves, aprons and masks.

Environmental Cleaning and Disinfection

- Public Health staff may recommend the use of a particular disinfectant which may be different than that used in the day-to-day cleaning of the centre. The recommended disinfectant may be more effective in killing the germ causing the outbreak than the centre's usual product.
- Public Health staff may prescribe an enhanced cleaning regime where surfaces, equipment and childcare items are cleaned and disinfected/sanitised more frequently than usual. A complete cleaning and disinfecting of a centre at night or over a weekend when children are not present may be necessary to prevent spread of illness.
- Soiled linen, clothing and other belongings must be handled carefully and should be stored in a sealed bag before laundering. These items should be soaked in a suitable sanitiser before being hot-washed.
- Cleaning up diarrhoea or vomit accidents must be done carefully. All standard cleaning and disinfection precautions apply including isolation of the area, use of protective clothing and equipment, and use of appropriate cleaning equipment, techniques and chemicals (refer to MidCentral Public Health Service *Cleaning and Disinfecting Guidelines for Early Childhood Education Services*, December 2010).

Limiting Activities and Visitors

Restriction to activities and/or visitors may be required to reduce the potential for spread of the illness. This may include:

- Modifying or limiting participation in community activities (e.g. trips to the community pool or library) or special events (e.g. group birthday parties).
- Posting signs at the entrance of the centre indicating that the centre is experiencing an increase in illness with information on precautions.
- Notify visitors or volunteers to take appropriate precautions (e.g. hand hygiene or postponing visit).
- Stop using communal play areas (e.g. water or sand) that pose a challenge to disinfect.

Closing the Centre

During a serious outbreak, temporary closure of a centre may be recommended to break the spread of illness. This decision would not be undertaken lightly and the decision would be made in consultation with centre management, Public Health staff and Ministry of Education staff. It is also recognised that the centre may choose to close voluntarily for a temporary period if the number of ill staff and children make it logistically impossible for the centre to operate.

If the centre is closed temporarily, the importance of keeping ill children at home and not sending their children to other centres should be discussed with parents/whanau.

Communication

Ensure that all parent/caregivers/whanau are kept informed of the outbreak and its progress. They have the right to know what is causing the outbreak and what to do to avoid infection. They should also be given advice on what to do if they display symptoms. Public Health staff can assist in the preparation of written material that can be distributed to parent/caregivers/whanau.

Daily briefings should be held with ECE service staff. Briefings should give clear instructions and reminders to staff outlining:

- The route of transmission of the illness and the current progress of the outbreak
- Appropriate infection control procedures including the need for scrupulous personal hygiene
- Cleaning and disinfection procedures
- Isolation of ill children until parents/caregivers/whanau collect them
- Ill staff to remain away from work until symptom-free for the recommended period (staff includes management, teachers, administration workers, food handlers/cooks and cleaners)
- Not to allow previously ill children back to the centre until the recommended recovery period has passed (Public Health staff working on the outbreak will be able to provide recommendations on this)

Once the outbreak is over and the ECE service has returned to business-as-usual, a debrief meeting should be held, especially if the outbreak was large or difficult to bring under control. The debrief should include centre management, staff and Public Health staff who assisted in the outbreak. Parents/whanau representatives may also be invited. The meeting should discuss what went well and what did not go well in the management and control of the outbreak. It should identify and document any changes required to the centre's policies for managing illnesses and outbreaks in the future.

REQUIRE FURTHER INFORMATION?

For any queries, assistance and advice, please contact a Health Protection Officer or Public Health Nurse at either:

The Public Health Centre
Wanganui Hospital
Heads Road
Private Bag 3003
WANGANUI
Telephone: (06) 348 1775

The Public Health Unit
Palmerston North Hospital
Heretaunga Street
Private Bag 11036
PALMERSTON NORTH
Telephone: (06) 350 9110

Other relevant Public Health Service information available to ECE Services include:

- Preventing Infectious Illnesses in Early Childhood Education Services
- Cleaning and Disinfecting Guidelines for Early Childhood Education Services
- Washing Sick or Soiled Children in Early Childhood Education Services
- Water Temperatures for Early Childhood Education Services
- Lead-Based Paints for Early Childhood Education Services
- Dishwashing for Early Childhood Education Services