

Guidelines for Prevention and Control of Communicable Diseases¹

Communicable diseases are a leading cause of childhood morbidity and school absences. Students and staff with communicable diseases that can be transmitted directly or indirectly from one individual to another require special consideration in the school setting. Local school district policies should address:

- The preventive measures necessary to protect the health of all students and staff.
- The procedures for the immediate care of students or staff that develop a potentially communicable illness.
- The special needs of children with chronic infectious illnesses which are determined to be non-contagious under normal conditions.

Rationale

- The spread of communicable disease can be prevented by adhering to evidence-based practices of immunizations, good hand hygiene, cough etiquette, maintenance of environmental cleanliness and recommended use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other protective measures. Parents, students, school administration and staff should understand their responsibilities in communicable disease control.
- [G.S. 130A-145](#) gives isolation and quarantine authority to the State Health Director and local health directors. The NC Division of Public Health holds responsibility for initiating preventive measures to suppress or prevent the spread of disease and for implementing regulations related to isolation, quarantine, and other control measures ([10A NCAC 41A .0201](#)) to protect the public. In consultation with the local health department, schools are authorized to prohibit the attendance of staff or students if necessary to prevent the spread of communicable disease.
- Schools have critical information and records necessary to identify cases, close contacts and implement additional control measures of a reportable communicable disease. Schools should promptly provide to the local public health authorities any and all requested records or information related to case investigation ([§ 130A-144](#)).
- Communicable disease management activities include timely identification and referral of students and staff. Appropriate follow-up to ensure care and treatment can help inhibit the spread of contagious illness in school and minimize excessive absence. According to [G.S. 130A-136](#), school principals who have reason to suspect that a person within the school has a reportable communicable disease or condition are required to report to the local health director of the county or district in which the school is located.
- Federal and state courts have held that children with chronic communicable diseases are entitled to a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.
- Persons with suppressed immune systems run a higher-than-average risk of severe complications from common communicable illness. Measures to effectively address these

¹ Information provided in this chapter is to be used as a reference and is not intended to be the single source of information on specific diseases. Readers should refer to their state and local public health department for the most current information.

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risks can be incorporated into an individual student plan of care.

Communicable diseases fall into two distinct categories: those that do not require a report to public health authorities and those that do. It is important for the school nurse to be aware of these differences to provide evidence-based information to school personnel, students, and parents so as to foster understanding and compliance with communicable disease control requirements and practices. Important goals for the school nurse are to prevent, recognize and respond to communicable disease outbreaks. Activities that can support these goals include:

- Reviewing immunization records for compliance with state requirements, noting those students with medical or religious exemptions. School nurses may request ‘read only’ access to the North Carolina Immunization Registry from the local health department. Under immunized students increase the potential for outbreaks which pose risk for students with suppressed immunity.
- Maintaining professional knowledge of signs and symptoms of common communicable illnesses and those illnesses that may be currently circulating to enhance surveillance efforts.
- Observing for increases in symptom clusters that may be indicative of an outbreak and report per local policy and/or procedure.
- Providing educational presentations regarding communicable disease issues to students, families, and staff upon request.
- Maintaining a current list of local health department contacts and gaining familiarity with communication channels and types of information needed when reporting.
- Regularly reviewing local policy and procedure; providing input for development or revision as needed. Resources are available from your Regional School Health Nurse Consultant.

NC Reportable Communicable Diseases

While the list of diseases reportable to the State Division of Public Health is lengthy, the number of such diseases common to the school age child is not. In the event of a reportable disease, the local health department will take the lead in an investigation. School staff should follow the school district’s policy and procedures for timely communication with local health departments. Care and treatment of a student suspected of having a reportable communicable disease is the responsibility of the parent. The school nurse should collaborate with the communicable disease contact person at the local health department when there are known or suspected cases of reportable diseases and/or an increase in the frequency of communicable diseases to coordinate a response.

The Department of Public Health, Communicable Disease Branch, has created a resource for managing known or suspected infectious diseases in the school setting. This can be found under the reporting tab of the [School Nursing Support](#) webpage. School nurses are also referred to the following resources in addressing response to specific communicable diseases.

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References and Resources

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