

pandemic plan



NATIONAL CENTER ON
Early Childhood Health and Wellness



Preparing for a Pandemic

What is a Pandemic?

A pandemic begins as an epidemic, which means a disease is affecting many people at one time and spreading rapidly. An epidemic that involves many countries is called a pandemic. Epidemics are common (seasonal flu occurs every year in the United States), but pandemics are rare.

Pandemics can be caused by viruses, bacteria, or other microorganisms. An example of a viral pandemic is influenza pandemic, a few of which have occurred in the past 100 years. The World Health Organization refers to HIV/AIDS as a pandemic because it affects many millions of people in many countries. The bubonic plague and cholera are each caused by bacteria and they have caused multiple pandemics, though not in recent

times, thanks to the widespread availability of antibiotics, clean water, and good sanitation.

The COVID-19 pandemic was caused by a coronavirus. Coronaviruses have caused several recent outbreaks of respiratory illness (SARS, MERS). Coronaviruses also cause about 15% of common cold infections. Viruses that cause influenza and the common cold mutate rapidly, and immunity to newly mutated viruses is often absent. When a virus mutates enough that most people have no immunity, then a pandemic can arise.



How Head Start Programs Can Address Pandemics

The characteristics of a particular pandemic (how it spreads, symptoms, rate of serious illness or death, treatment, who is most affected) differ depending on the microorganism that causes the disease, so these are not predictable in advance. During a pandemic, state and local public health officials guide communities on actions to help prevent the spread of the disease. However, there are a few basic concepts that can help centers prepare for any pandemic.

- Make sure that pandemic preparedness is addressed in your emergency planning, including the following:
 - Involve community partners to assist with emergency planning.
 - Plan how to deal with interruptions in care, including advising parents to plan for emergency child care in case of closure.
- Review basic infectious disease control strategies on a regular basis with staff members, families, and children.
- Review your state's requirements for reporting illness.

Pandemic Preparedness

Every center has an emergency plan that should encompass all hazards. Many of these plans focus on extreme weather or natural disasters. Make sure that pandemic planning has been addressed in the emergency plan.

When planning for a pandemic, it may be helpful to review the topics included in the [Head Start System Management Wheel: Guiding Questions During a Pandemic](#) to aid planning for immediate and temporary needs as well as longer term concerns.

Control of a pandemic may require public health officials to recommend temporary closures of child care and early education settings. To assist programs with their eligibility, recruitment, selection, enrollment, and attendance (ERSEA) strategies during and after a pandemic, the Office of Head Start has prepared guidance for recruiting and prioritizing eligible children in [ERSEA: Strategies During a Pandemic](#).

Any emergency preparedness strategy involves connecting with local partners to obtain the best information and to coordinate communication and services. Be sure to reach out to public health officials in your community and state. Review the illnesses that are reportable, establish a reliable tracking system for illnesses (for staff and children), and learn the processes for reporting these illnesses.



Pandemic Control Strategies

Limiting the spread of any infectious disease during a pandemic has several basic components.

Hand hygiene. On a regular basis, review the [handwashing guidance from the CDC](#) with staff and families. Staff can assist children with appropriate hand hygiene, including washing infants hands with soap and water at the sink. [Posters with pictures](#) help train children and are good reminders when placed in handwashing areas. Use soap and water unless it is not available. Soap and water are better at reducing viruses and bacteria on the hands than hand sanitizers.

Control airborne secretions. Coughs and sneezes spread droplets that contain viruses and bacteria. These droplets can land on others and on objects where the organisms can remain infectious. Review [proper coughing and sneezing practices](#) with staff, children, and families regularly so these are well-established habits. [Reminder posters](#) can help.

Keep hands away from the face. Remind staff and families that touching the face, particularly the eyes, nose, and mouth, can spread viruses. It may not be developmentally appropriate to try to keep young children, particularly infants and toddlers, from touching

their faces, but adults can avoid infecting themselves by getting into the habit of avoiding touching their own faces.

Maintain proper disinfection and cleaning practices. Review the cleaning and disinfection guidance in [Caring For Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards](#), in addition to consulting your state licensing regulations. Licensing regulations often guide the type of disinfectant that may be used and disinfection practices, both of which may vary from state to state. During a pandemic, national or local health official may recommend additional disinfection practices.

Masks and distancing. Protocols for facial masks and distancing (the space that should be maintained between people who are not living together) may be advised for the general public but these are difficult to implement in a child care setting. Masks are not advised for young children because they do not fit and are a strangulation risk. Guidance for staff, families and the general public regarding social distancing and masks will be unique to the particular organization. Therefore, facility managers should consult with national or local public health officials for specific guidance during a pandemic.

Establish facility protocols for pandemic infection control. Consider establishing procedures that prepare or address infection control for a pandemic. For example:

- Keep sufficient infection control supplies on hand (disinfectants, paper towels, soap).
- Train staff to recognize the pandemic illness in parents.



- Require staff to stay home if ill. Establish procedures to provide sufficient and reliable back-up help. Provide adequate sick pay.
- Have a plan and a location (a “sick room”) for keeping children who become ill during the day away from other children.

Working with Families

Provide regular guidance before a pandemic.

Education regarding basic hygiene and infection control practices provides families with the tools and information necessary to keep safe and prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Establish a regular cycle of distribution of periodic educational materials and demonstrations.

Relay the research. Education regarding the importance of appropriate hand washing in controlling all kinds of infections helps families create positive habits that benefit everyone during a pandemic.

- Handwashing is one of the most effective ways to prevent spreading influenza, colds, and diarrheal infections.¹
- Studies show that while most people attempt to wash their hands, some do not use soap, and only 5% of do so for long enough.²

- Men are significantly less likely to wash their hands than women.^{2,3}

Be factual. Families, children and staff can feel panicked during a pandemic because of feelings of being out of control and vulnerable. Accurate information, a supportive environment, and calmness from authority figures such as teachers and facility leaders can help calm fears.

Remind families that well-child doctor visits should continue during a pandemic. During a pandemic, families may place regular vaccination and well-child visits on the back burner.⁴ Delayed or skipped immunization places children at risk for diseases other than the pandemic. Forgoing well-child guidance can lead to delays in the diagnosis and care of developmental disorders. During a pandemic, encourage families to maintain regular well-child visits by establishing a reminder and tracking system.

1. Aiello AE, Coulborn RM, Perez V, Larson EL. Effect of hand hygiene on infectious disease risk in the community setting: a meta-analysis. *Am J Public Health*. 2008 Aug;98(8):1372-81.
2. Borchgrevink CP, Cha JM, Kim SH. Handwashing practices in a college town environment. *J Env Health*. 75(8):18-24.
3. Moran KR, Del Valle SY. A Meta-analysis of the association between gender and protective behaviors in response to respiratory epidemics and pandemics. *PLoS One*. 2016;11(10):e0164541.
4. Santoli JM, Lindley MC, DeSilva MB, et al. Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on routine pediatric vaccine ordering and administration—United States, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep*. ePub: 8 May 2020.



Resources

[Ready.gov!](#) (Information for families)

[Pandemic Influenza](#) (Information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

[Get Ready for Seasonal and Pandemic Flu: Strategies for Head Start and Child Care](#) (webinar)



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View other topics in the Embracing Health and Wellness Series on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/health-services-management/article/embracing-health-wellness-series>

Our Goal: To help Head Start and Early Head Start programs implement best practices and effective approaches within the areas of medical and dental care access, health awareness, healthy active living, emergency preparedness, and environmental safety to support healthy outcomes and school readiness for young children and their families.

Contact Us: The National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness welcomes your feedback as well as your suggestions for topics for future resources! Please forward your comments to: health@ecetta.info or call us at 888-227-5125

School readiness begins with health!