

What is an outbreak?

An outbreak is when there are more cases of a disease than expected in a group of people than we expect, e.g.:

- childcare with hand, foot and mouth disease
- schools with chicken pox
- residential care with gastro

How are outbreaks managed?

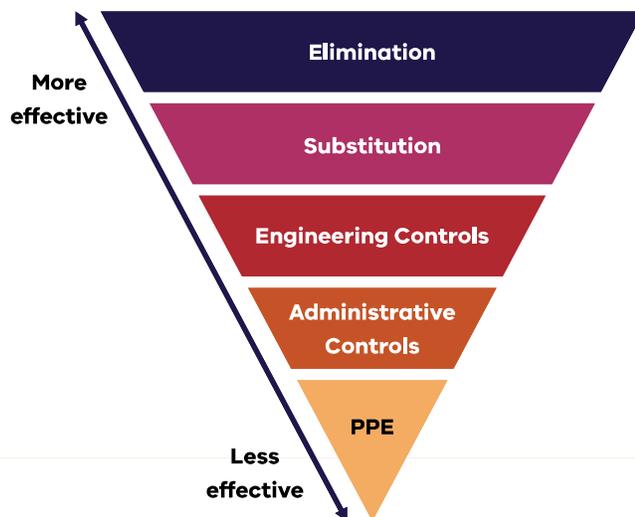
In a workplace, managers or specialist infection prevention and control staff will take action. They will:

- confirm there is an outbreak
- find out who is affected and who is at risk
- set procedures to control the outbreak and prevent further spread
- some outbreaks may need to be reported to authorities.

Transmission-based precautions are added to the standard precautions we use all the time. These are different for germs that spread by contact, droplets or are airborne. For example, ventilation is important for an airborne outbreak such as COVID-19 but is not needed for a gastro outbreak.

The hierarchy of controls

The hierarchy of controls is a system for controlling risks. It can be applied to outbreaks of infection. The ways of controlling risks are ordered from the most effective at the top to the least effective at the bottom.



Read more on the next page.



Hierarchy of controls

Elimination

Physically remove the hazard

E.g., keep a germ out of a workplace by staying home if you have gastro.

Substitution

Replace the hazard with something less risky.

E.g., in a healthcare setting, nebulisers may be replaced with an alternative in an outbreak of an airborne infection.

Engineering

Isolate the people from the hazard

E.g., Change ventilation or airflow; put up barriers or screens.

Administrative

Change the way work is performed

E.g., schedule more cleaning or provide infection control training.

PPE

Protect people with PPE.

Note that this is the last and least-effective control.

Outbreak procedures: Cohorting

This means grouping similar people together people. E.g., aged care residents infected with the same germ may be placed in the same room or an zone of the building. This is done by an infection prevention and control expert.

A workforce 'bubble' is another example where staff are grouped together to reduce the spread of infection. Your 'bubble' might be rostered on the same shift so that you do not interact with other staff teams.

Outbreak strategies: Ventilation

If an infection is spread through the air e.g., COVID-19, ventilation is an important way to prevent spread.

This is as simple as opening doors and windows, reducing the number of people in a room or using an air scrubber. However, improving the air conditioning will need an engineer.

Note: split systems and fans do not bring in any fresh air, so you also need to open windows.



This is a summary of the *Outbreaks* module in the Department of Health's Infection Prevention and Control eLearning series. Access this and other modules in the series at www.vicniss.org.au/resources/ipc-elearning-modules/

