

Pandemic Preparedness: The Role of Licensed Practical Nurses

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INTRODUCTION

The College of Licensed Practical Nurses and Health Care Aides of Alberta (CLHA) has the authority under the *Health Professions Act* (HPA) to carry out its activities and govern Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs)* in a manner that protects and serves the public interest.

During a pandemic, healthcare professionals face increased demands, including higher client loads, longer work hours, and a greater risk of contracting an infection. These challenges can lead to physical and mental exhaustion, stress, moral distress, and burnout. This info sheet provides information for LPNs on influenza and the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemics, as they are the most prevalent in Canada.

PANDEMIC CHARACTERISTICS

Defining Pandemic

Pandemics have been a part of human history for centuries, causing widespread illness and death worldwide. The Public Health Agency of Canada defines a pandemic as “an epidemic occurring globally, crossing international boundaries, and usually affecting a large number of people.”ⁱ All pandemics have an impact on healthcare professionals.

Pandemic Preparedness: Phases and Strategies

The World Health Organization (WHO) provides a global framework that outlines the phases of pandemics that are applicable worldwide. These phases help guide public health responses and preparedness efforts to mitigate the impact of pandemics.

- **Interpandemic phase:** no viruses circulating among animals have been reported to cause infections in humans.
- **Alert phase:** an animal virus has caused small clusters of disease in humans but has not resulted in human-to-human transmission, which is considered a potential pandemic threat.

* In this document, “LPN(s)” has the same meaning as “regulated member(s)” in the *Health Professions Act*.

- **Pandemic phase:** verified human-to-human transmission causing community outbreaks, spreading across countries, indicating an imminent pandemic, and finally, global community-level outbreaks indicating a pandemic is underway.
- **Transition phase:** disease levels in most countries with adequate surveillance have dropped below peak levels, but the possibility of new waves remains.
- **Post-pandemic (interpandemic) phase:** disease activity returns to levels commonly seen for seasonal illnesses. Continued vigilance and preparedness are necessary as the virus may continue to circulate and cause outbreaks.ⁱⁱ

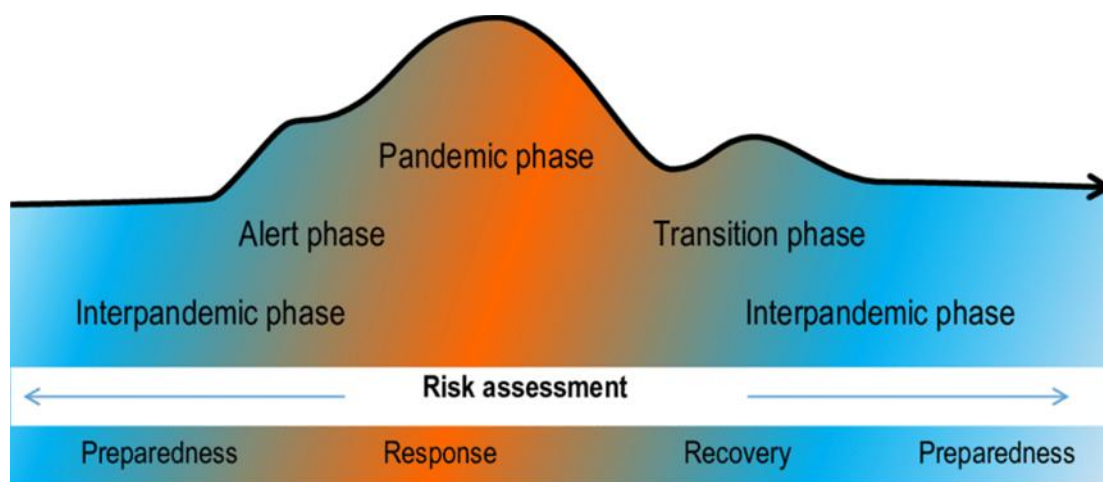


Figure 1 The WHO Continuum of Pandemic Phasesⁱⁱⁱ

Transmission

Infectious diseases can spread from person to person in the workplace due to the vulnerability of clients and the close contact environment. Healthcare professionals can get infected through the means described below.

- **Respiratory transmission**
 - Droplet exposure: infection is spread from coughing, sneezing, or talking.
 - Aerosols: smaller particles that remain in the air, especially in settings with poor ventilation.
- **Contact transmission**
 - Direct contact: touching clients, surfaces, or body fluids.
 - Indirect contact: no direct human-to-human contact. Transmission occurs from coming into contact with contaminated air or the personal environment.^{iv}
- **High-risk environments**
 - Emergency and intensive care units: have high acuity sick clients and often use aerosolizing equipment (e.g. ventilators).^v

- Long-term care facilities: close contact with clients who have co-morbidities, putting them at greater risk.
- **Inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE)**
 - Availability: lack of masks, gloves, gowns, eyewear, shoe and head covers, and face shields.
 - Improper use and inadequate fitting of PPE equipment, e.g. incorrect use of hand sanitizer or ill-fitting face masks.
- **Community transmission**
 - Outside of work: contracting viruses in the community and bringing them to the workplace.^{vi}

LPNs should understand how diseases are transmitted and how the application of infection prevention and control (IPC) principles can break the chain of transmission. For more information, please refer to the CLHA's *Infection Prevention and Control practice* guideline.

Impact of a Pandemic

During or after a pandemic, there is added demand on the healthcare system and client care needs. LPNs must adhere to all legislation, regulations, and standards of practice to provide safe, competent, and ethical nursing practice. LPNs may experience challenges during or after a pandemic as categorized below.

- Mental health strain due to high levels of stress, burnout, moral distress, and anxiety because of the intensity and the prolonged nature of their work.
- Negative impacts on physical health due to extended work hours, which can disrupt sleep patterns and cause fatigue and sleep disorders.
- Increased workload due to the sudden and significant increase in the number of clients seeking medical care.
- Emotional burden from seeing clients suffer or die, sometimes without a family member present.
- Lack of PPE due to a shortage of protective gear can make it difficult for LPNs to stay safe while caring for clients.
- Aggressive behaviour, such as hostility from clients, their families, or the community, especially when there is distrust in health measures such as vaccines.
- Training gaps due to the need to care for clients outside their usual practice areas, often with minimal training.^{vii}

Please see the CLHA's *Fitness to Practice* and HPA's *Definition of "Incapacitated"* for more information about circumstances in which an LPN's fitness to practice could be questioned or felt to be compromised.

Professional Responsibility and Accountability

As outlined in the *Code of Ethics for Licensed Practical Nurses* and the *Standards of Practice for Licensed Practical Nurses in Canada*, LPNs have a responsibility to provide safe, ethical, and competent care. During emergencies, LPNs are expected to manage their professional duties while attending to their personal responsibilities, including maintaining their mental and physical health. LPNs must ensure they stay fit to practice and take steps to address any issues that might affect their ability to work safely and effectively.

Please see the *Expectations and Obligations During Emergencies* and the *Professional Responsibility and Accountability* policies on the CLHA's website for more information.

Preparedness and Control Measures

The table below highlights the key areas in which LPNs can assist with strengthening the health system during a pandemic.

Key Areas	Details
Client Care	<p>Direct care: providing personalized, high-quality care to clients, including those with infectious diseases.</p> <p>Monitoring and evaluation: continuously assessing client's conditions and adjusting care plans and workloads as needed.</p> <p>Collaborating with employers to ease workloads, reduce burnout, and streamline nursing activities by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exploring alternate care models. • exploring flexible staffing strategies. • cross-training for different roles. • leveraging technology. • delegating non-clinical duties and prioritizing certain tasks to support staff.^{viii}

Key Areas	Details
Self-Care	<p>During times of increased pressure, it is important for LPNs to maintain their own wellness by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • getting enough sleep. • practicing mindfulness to help them stay focused and reduce stress. • participating in activities that help them relax and recharge. • engaging in regular physical activities. • maintaining a balanced diet. • seeking counselling services to improve their mental and emotional health. • participating in stress management programs.^{ix}
Workplace Support	<p>Health and safety measures: communicate the need for a consistent supply of high-quality PPE, additional training, strict adherence to infection control protocols, and regular cleaning of workspaces.</p> <p>Flexible scheduling and rest periods: work with the employer to explore flexible work schedules to accommodate personal and family needs, if required or possible.</p> <p>Professional development and training: request crisis management and de-escalation training to assist with handling high-pressure situations effectively.</p> <p>Reassignment/redeployment to other roles or duties: request additional training to ensure competence if required to work outside their usual practice area.</p> <p>Family support services: notify the employer if time off is needed to care for sick family members or manage personal health. Support can also be accessed through employee assistance programs provided by the employer.</p>

Key Areas	Details
Infection Control	<p>Implementing protocols: enforce strict infection control measures to prevent the spread of the virus.</p> <p>Use of PPE: ensure proper use and management of PPE for the safety of clients and healthcare workers.</p> <p>Hygiene practices: regular hand hygiene and environmental cleaning are essential to prevent the spread of the virus.</p> <p>Isolation and quarantine: isolate infected individuals and quarantine those exposed to control outbreaks per employer requirements.</p> <p>Vaccination: annual flu and up-to-date COVID-19 vaccinations are recommended to reduce outbreaks.</p> <p>Early detection: notify and report any new symptoms clients are experiencing to the most responsible health practitioner.</p> <p>Real-time mentoring: provide guidance and support to the public or staff who are not familiar with or not properly following IPC protocols.</p>
Ethical Responsibilities	<p>Duty of care: balancing the duty to care for clients with the need to protect an LPN's own health and well-being.</p> <p>Professional integrity: uphold ethical standards and maintain professional conduct under pressure, ensuring continuous care without abandoning clients.</p> <p>Advocating for clients: support clients when their health is compromised while respecting their freedom of choice and providing unbiased care.</p>
Education and Awareness	<p>Information dissemination: educate the public on diseases and prevention and guide them to evidence informed sources.</p> <p>Awareness: be aware of, implement, and follow public health measures as directed by Chief Medical Officer of Health and the employer.</p>

Key Areas	Details
Technological Integration	<p>Professional development: stay updated with the latest technology in all practice settings.</p> <p>Adaptability: be flexible and adaptable to new care delivery methods like telehealth.</p> <p>Technical proficiency: learn to use virtual care tools and platforms efficiently.^x</p>
Resource Management	<p>Efficient use: manage medical supplies and PPE effectively.</p> <p>Coordination: work with other healthcare professionals and the employer to ensure optimal use of resources.</p>

CONCLUSION

LPNs face many challenges during a pandemic. They play a crucial role in maintaining safe practice standards and need support to manage stress.

Accessing employee assistance programs and participating in self-care activities can provide essential support and foster a healthier, stronger workforce. Additionally, advocating for consistent PPE supply, mental health resources, flexible scheduling, professional development, and family support services can help LPNs handle the demands of a pandemic. These measures ensure that LPNs remain resilient and capable of meeting the increased demands of the healthcare system.

Documents are updated frequently. For the most current version and access to related documents and resources, please visit the Knowledge Hub on clha.com.

If after reading this document you have questions about this topic, please contact the CLHA's Professional Practice Team at practice@clha.com, 780-484-8886 or 1-800-661-5877 (toll free in Alberta).

REFERENCES

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