

Pandemic Preparedness: The Role of Health Care Aides

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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** the practice of Health Care Aides (HCAs)* in a manner that protects and serves the public interest.

During a **pandemic**, healthcare workers may face increased responsibilities, such as having more clients to attend to and working longer hours, which can lead to a higher chance of becoming ill. These responsibilities can lead to healthcare workers feeling tired, stressed, and even lead to **burnout**. This info sheet provides HCAs with details about **influenza** and coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemics, which have had significant impacts in Canada.

Terms found in the definition section are **bolded** where they appear for the first time in this document.

PURPOSE

This document provides HCAs with information and tools to support safe and effective care for clients during a pandemic while protecting their own health and well-being.

UNDERSTANDING A PANDEMIC

What Is a Pandemic?

The Public Health Agency of Canada states that a pandemic occurs when a disease spreads across many countries and affects a large number of people.¹ Pandemics have been around for a long time and can cause severe illness, sometimes leading to **fatalities**.

* "In this document, "Health Care Aides (HCAs)" has the same meaning as "regulated member(s)" in the *Health Professions Act*".

How the Disease Spreads

Infectious diseases can spread in the workplace because clients are ill, and people are in close contact. As a result, healthcare workers and other clients may become infected in several ways, which are described below.

- Respiratory **transmission**: exposure to tiny particles in the air from coughing, sneezing, or talking and particles remaining in poorly ventilated areas.
- Contact transmission: direct contact like touching clients, surfaces, or body fluids and indirect contact like coming into contact with contaminated air or the environment.²
- Community transmission: becoming infected with a virus outside of work and bringing it to the workplace.³
- Environments: high-risk environments such as emergency and intensive care units with very ill clients, exposure to germs in the air generated by the equipment, and long-term care facilities where there is close contact with and between clients with serious medical conditions.⁴
- Inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE): lack of masks, gloves, gowns, eyewear, shoes, head covers, face shields, and improper use of hand sanitizer or poorly fitting masks.

It is important for HCAs to know how diseases spread and how to use infection prevention and control (IPC) methods to stop the spread. For more information, please refer to the CLHA's *Infection Prevention and Control* practice guideline and employer policies.

Challenges of a Pandemic on HCAs

During or after a pandemic, individuals need more care, thereby increasing pressure on the healthcare system.

Healthcare workers should follow all rules and guidelines to provide safe, skilled, and ethical care. HCAs may face challenges such as the ones described below.

- Mental health strain: high stress, burnout, **moral distress**, and anxiety from intense and long-lasting work.
- Emotional stress: from seeing clients suffer or die, often without family present.
- Physical health issues: long work hours can cause **fatigue** and sleep problems, skipping meals or eating unhealthy foods can lead to poor nutrition, and mental fatigue decreases **concentration**.
- Increased workload: due to a sudden rise in the number of clients needing care.
- Lack of PPE: makes it hard to stay safe while caring for clients.
- Aggressive behaviour: anger from clients, their families, or the community, sometimes when there is distrust in guidance such as with vaccines.
- Training gaps: caring for clients normally served by other staff with little training.⁵

Professional Responsibility and Accountability

As outlined in the *Standards of Practice for Health Care Aides in Alberta*, HCAs must provide safe, ethical, and skilled care. During emergencies, such as during a pandemic, HCAs need to balance their work duties with personal **responsibilities**, including taking care of their mental and physical health. HCAs should make sure they are **fit to practice** and 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* policy on the CLHA website for more information.

Safety Measures

Below are the key areas in which HCAs can assist within the health system and maintain their own wellness when facing increased pressure.

Areas of Support to Maintain Wellness

- Self-care: get enough sleep, relax, enjoy hobbies, exercise, eat healthy foods, seek counselling, and manage stress.⁶
- Client care: provide personalized care to clients, observe and report changes in a client's condition, and adjust routines as needed.
- Workplace support: work with the healthcare team to reduce workload and ensure safety, work with the employer to have flexible schedules, get training for new roles, and seek family support when needed. Also, consider accessing employee assistance programs provided by the employer.
- Infection control: follow strict IPC measures, use PPE properly, practice good hand hygiene, get vaccinated if possible, and report any symptoms to the supervisor.
- Ethical responsibilities: balance care, maintain **integrity**, respect and protect clients, and practice in a **culturally safe** manner.
- Education and awareness: be informed, follow **public health measures**, and request additional education if asked to perform duties outside your usual role.
- Technology: stay updated and learn to use the technological tools in your work environment.
- Resource management: use supplies efficiently and notify the employer or supervisor if supplies are running low.

CONCLUSION

HCAAs face many challenges while providing safe and effective care during a pandemic. They play a key role in maintaining safe practice standards, however they need support to manage their own wellness and reduce stress by promoting self-care and utilizing available resources such as employee assistance programs to help strengthen their abilities.

Additionally, advocating for consistent PPE supply, mental health resources, flexible scheduling, professional development, and family support services can help HCAs handle the demands of a pandemic. These measures assist HCAs in remaining fit to practice and able to meet the 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, please contact the CLHA's Professional Practice Team via practice@clha.com or 780-484-8886 or 1-800-661-5877 (toll free in Alberta).

DEFINITIONS

Accountability: the duty to answer for the professional, legal, and ethical responsibilities of one's actions.⁷

Authority: refers to the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience. It can also mean the appropriate person to give orders or make decisions.

Burnout: the constant feeling of being overwhelmed, tired, and emotionally drained due to ongoing stress at the workplace.⁸

Concentration: refers to the ability to focus attention and mental effort on the tasks at hand.

Cultural Safety: is an outcome based on respectful engagement that recognizes and strives to address power imbalances present in the healthcare system. It results in an environment free of racism and discrimination, where people feel safe when receiving health care. Cultural safety allows someone to authentically be who they are.[†]

Fatalities: an occurrence of death by accident, in war, or from disease.

Fatigue: refers to a state of physical, mental, or emotional exhaustion that can affect the ability to perform their duties effectively.

Fit to practice: refers to having the physical, mental, and emotional health to provide safe, competent, and ethical care.

Govern: to lead, control, or manage an organization or group, often by creating rules and making decisions that guide their actions.

Influenza: a contagious respiratory virus that causes mild to severe respiratory disease.

Integrity: being honest and trustworthy.

Moral distress: when a person is prevented from acting in a way that aligns with their personal or professional values, which then causes them distress.⁹

Pandemic: a widespread occurrence of an infectious disease over a whole country or the world at a particular time.¹⁰

Public health measures: refer to policies and actions implemented to protect and improve the health of populations. These measures can include a wide range of strategies aimed at preventing disease, promoting healthy behaviours, and managing health risks.

Responsibility: the ability to respond and answer for one's actions and duties. Being responsible means that an individual is trustworthy and reliable.¹¹

Transmission: disease transmission is the passing of a disease-causing organism from an infected host individual or group to another individual or group.

[†] Notes from G4 Council Meeting

REFERENCES

¹ Public Health Agency of Canada, *Canadian Pandemic Influenza Preparedness: Planning Guidance for the Health Sector*, (2024), [Glossary: Canadian Pandemic Influenza Preparedness: Planning Guidance for the Health Sector - Canada.ca](#)

² Centre for Disease Control (CDC), *CDC's Core Infection Prevention and Control Practices for Safe Healthcare Delivery in All Settings*, (2024), [Glossary: Canadian Pandemic Influenza Preparedness: Planning Guidance for the Health Sector - Canada.ca](#)

³ World Health Organization (WHO), *Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19*, (2020), [getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf](#)

⁴ Susan McGrath, PhD, George Blike, MD, MHCDS, Bryan M. Gale, MA, Sarah E. Mossburg, RN, PhD, *Surveillance Monitoring to Improve Patient Safety in Acute Hospital Care Units*, (2023), [Surveillance Monitoring to Improve Patient Safety in Acute Hospital Care Units | PSNet](#)

⁵ Canadian Institute for Health (CIHI), *Overview: COVID-19's impact on health care systems*, (2024), [Overview: COVID-19's impact on health care systems | CIHI](#)

⁶ American Institute of Healthcare Compliance, *Building a Culture of Patient Safety Starts with Reducing Staff Burnout*, (2024), [Building a Culture of Patient Safety Starts with Reducing Staff Burnout - American Institute of Healthcare Compliance](#)

⁷ Canadian Council for Practical Nurse Regulators (CCPNR), *Entry-Level Competencies for Licensed Practical Nurses* (2019), [Overview: COVID-19's impact on health care systems | CIHI](#)

⁸ World Health Organization (WHO), *Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon": International Classification of Diseases*, (2019), [Overview: COVID-19's impact on health care systems | CIHI](#)

⁹ Alberta Health Services (AHS) *Let's Talk Moral Distress Resource Guide*, (2022), [Overview: COVID-19's impact on health care systems | CIHI](#)

¹⁰ Government of Alberta, *Alberta's Pandemic Influenza Plan*, 2014. [Alberta Pandemic Influenza Plan 2014](#)

¹¹ CCPNR, *Entry-Level Competencies*.