

Outbreak or Disease Cluster

An outbreak is defined as the occurrence of a medical condition that exceeds the baseline or expected rate within a specific place or group of people over a given period of time. Outbreaks can be caused by a variety of etiologic agents, transmitted person-to-person, or via a common source, resulting in mild or serious illness. There is no minimum number of cases that constitutes an outbreak. In some instances, a single case can constitute an outbreak depending on the organism (example: smallpox). The rate increase that should trigger reporting will vary according to the circumstances surrounding the event and requires exercise of professional judgment.

While the decision to report an outbreak requires professional judgment, outbreaks should be reported when an increase in illness leads local public health personnel to— (a) identify cases, (b) seek causes, or (c) institute control measures. When in doubt, report, but know that service public health authorities are most interested in the following:

- Illnesses causing a rapid rise in numbers of affected persons
- Severe illnesses such as hospitalized cases
- Illnesses which appear to be limited to a specific group (demographic, occupational, etc.)
- Illnesses indicative of highly infectious or virulent organisms requiring rapid implementation of control measures
- Illnesses which affect or have the potential to affect mission readiness
- Illnesses leading to control measure recommendations which are invasive, involve mass prophylaxis, or are potentially resource intensive
- Illnesses with the potential to attract media attention or generate public concern
- Illnesses which may prompt an installation commander to exercise public health emergency powers (i.e., illnesses indicative of a public health emergency or act of bioterrorism)
- Vaccine-preventable illnesses occurring in a highly vaccinated population

Outbreaks are reportable regardless of whether the etiologic agent itself is known or on the reportable disease list. If the etiological agent is on the reportable disease list, then also report each case individually in addition to reporting the outbreak, unless otherwise directed by your service point of contact!

Critical Reporting Elements:

Document the following in an Outbreak Report in DRSi:

- Location of outbreak
- Source of outbreak, if known or suspected
- Case symptoms and likely etiological agent (if known)
- Number affected in outbreak
- Group affiliation (e.g., military unit, boy scouts)
- Beginning and end dates for outbreak
- Actions taken to mitigate outbreak