

2025-26 Seasonal Respiratory Surge Exercise

Facilitator's Guide


Ministry of Health
July 2025

Ontario 

Facilitation Guide Introduction

Congratulations, you have been identified as the Facilitator for the 2025-26 respiratory season exercise! Whether this is your first time as a Facilitator or you have experience, please use this Facilitator's Guide to help you through the process. This Guide, along with the accompanying documents, provides all the tools you will need to run the exercise:

- The **Facilitator's Guide** contains background about this table-top exercise, suggestions on how to run a successful exercise, as well as guiding notes for each slide in the Respiratory Exercise deck.
- The **Respiratory Exercise** deck provides all the necessary information to complete the exercise. It is where you will find the scenario details, and discussion and hot wash questions.
- The **Exercise Reporting Form** is a worksheet prepared for Scribes to utilize in conjunction with the Respiratory Exercise deck to record players responses and hot wash discussion.



Exercise: a simulated emergency in which players discuss/carry out actions expected of them in a real event. Exercises can range from table-top discussions to drills to full-functioning exercises.

Table-Top Exercise: a discussions-based exercise used to promote familiarity with an emergency plan for a specific risk. The success of a table-top exercise is determined by feedback from participants and the impact the feedback has on the evaluation and revision of policies, plans, and procedures.

Tips for Facilitation

A Facilitator's role is crucial in ensuring an effective table-top exercise. Here are some tips:

- Maintain a positive and cooperative energy
- Emphasize a low-stress environment
- Listen actively to draw out assumptions
- Paraphrase to clarify
- Ask follow-up questions
- Encourage everyone to participate
- Keep control of the discussion and time
- Avoid the temptation to jump in with solutions as this can hamper discussion
- Remember that not everyone will be equally knowledgeable about the plan(s) being evaluated
- Vary the tempo of play, even reading out 2-3 questions at once to increase pace and interest
- When discussion stalls, move to a new question and/or a new phase of the scenario



Facilitation: the process of free(ing) from difficulties or obstacles.

Exercise Guidelines



Create a No-Fault Environment

Exercises should be held in an open environment, where asking questions, sharing thoughts, and offering forward-looking ideas and suggestions are strongly encouraged. Varying viewpoints, even disagreements, are expected.



Test the Plan, not the People

Exercises are not meant to test players, but their plans. A successful exercise is one where you can uncover gaps and evaluate different capabilities in plans, systems, and processes.



Do Not Fight the Scenario

Treat the exercise scenario(s) as real events. An exercise's scenario is not particularly important. What is important is that the group has a chance to test their plans to achieve their objectives.



Brainstorm Solutions Freely

An exercise is an opportunity to discuss and present multiple solutions. Decisions during discussions does not reflect and/or commit your group to future obligations and/or responsibilities.



Acknowledge Distractions

Acknowledge that personal and/or professional distractions may occur during exercise play. Consider appropriate responses beforehand to address any potential disruptions.



Use a Parking Lot (optional)

The parking lot is a place to note ideas that can be discussed at a later time if the conversation is stalled, and/or players do not have an answer to a specific problem. If the Facilitator chooses to use a parking lot, make sure to explain why the parking lot exists and its purpose for keeping the conversation on track.

Setting the Stage

1. Welcome exercise Players and put them at ease.
2. Assign a Scribe to document key discussion points in the accompanying Exercise Reporting Form
3. Communicate the exercise guidelines so everyone is aware of the ground rules (refer to slide 4 of this Facilitation Guide).
4. Brief the participants about what will happen. This should include a clear explanation of the Respiratory Exercise deck's introductory slides (Outline, Context, Planning Assumptions, and Exercise Purpose & Objectives).
5. Start Exercise Play:
 - Guide Players through each of the phases of the scenario.
 - Encourage active participation to discussion questions.



Player: Person(s) who respond to the situation presented, based on expert knowledge of response procedures, current plans and procedures, and insights derived from training.

Scribe: Person who records players responses to exercise questions.

Running the Exercise

Exercise Outline

Sections	Suggested Time for Completion
Introduction: <ul style="list-style-type: none">ContextExercise Purpose & ObjectivesPlanning Assumptions	15 min.
Exercise Scenario: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Phase 1Phase 2	45 min. 45 min.
Hot Wash	15 min.
Total Time	2 hours

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- Outline to Players the suggested time to complete each exercise scenario phase.
- Both phases should encourage active discussion. If conversation stalls, use the injects to prompt players and keep the dialogue flowing.

Context

- Current data indicates ongoing risk from COVID-19, as well as seasonal respiratory season risk from influenza, RSV and other viruses. Additionally, there are other **ongoing risks** to the health care system such as measles and invasive group A streptococcus.
- Per emergency management best practices, **effective planning and preparedness** can be fostered in the facilitation and participation of emergency exercises.
- Exercises provide a low-risk, cost-effective environment **to test and validate plans, policies, procedures and capabilities**; and **identify resource requirements, capability gaps, strengths, areas for improvement, and potential best practices**. These exercises are a useful way to maintain and strengthen coordination tables and networks that may be used during respiratory season.
- As the province looks towards the 2025-2026 respiratory season, there are opportunities to inform both health system and community-level readiness to seasonal respiratory pathogens through the roll-out of a **respiratory exercise**.
- We understand that the burden of respiratory diseases disproportionately affects populations already facing health inequities – including Indigenous, Black, and other racialized, low-income, and newcomer communities. Health and social inequities are exacerbated during such outbreaks.

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- Provide an overview of the exercise context
- Note the emphases on improving health equity in the last bullet. Players may wish to leverage their knowledge of population health, social determinants of health, health inequity and other sources of information to assess the needs of at-risk populations in their answers.

Running the Exercise

Planning Assumptions

- Players are responding with the **resources, plans and processes** already available to them at the time of the exercise; **no additional funding/resources should be assumed** e.g. additional assessment centres being funded by the province.
- Players are responding with the direction already available to them at the time of the exercise; **no additional guidance should be assumed** e.g. universal masking direction from province.
- The exercise **scenarios do not reflect real data for the 2025-2026 respiratory season**. Actual planning assumptions for what is anticipated will be updated and shared closer to the season as the ministry receives more information from various jurisdictions.

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- These planning assumptions may not be inclusive to what Players are aware of. You may wish to add to this to suit the needs of your group, as required.


Exercise Purpose & Objectives


Purpose: Exercise preparedness and response plans to bolster health system and community-level readiness and resilience for future pandemics and infectious disease threats.

We thank all participants of the 2024 exercise. Your feedback has been instrumental in enhancing this years' experience. In response to the feedback received, we have made improvements to this year's Exercise Package, tailoring the content to be more adaptable and data-centric, facilitating a more comprehensive discussion. Additionally, we have expedited the delivery of the Package, providing it two months in advance of last year's timeline. This proactive measure aims to facilitate earlier planning sessions and foster broader stakeholder engagement

Objectives

**Validate** governance/response structures related to respiratory season readiness planning and/or response

**Validate** roles and responsibilities related to respiratory season readiness planning and/or response.

**Identify** planning and/or response readiness gaps to mitigate risks related to respiratory season.

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- You may wish to print this page out or display the Objectives so Players can reference it throughout the exercise and let it guide their discussion.

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Running the Exercise

Start of Exercise



- The opening remarks of the exercise influence the whole exercise experience; keep the Tips for Facilitation in mind.

Scenario – Phase 1

Today is December 20, 2025...

Pathogen Report:

- Influenza positivity rates detected in the province is at 18%, 80% of cases being Influenza A and 20% Influenza B.
- RSV (12% positivity) and COVID-19 (25% positivity) are circulating at extremely high levels.
- The peak of measles cases was September, but due to global activity there are concerns of additional returning cases after the holidays

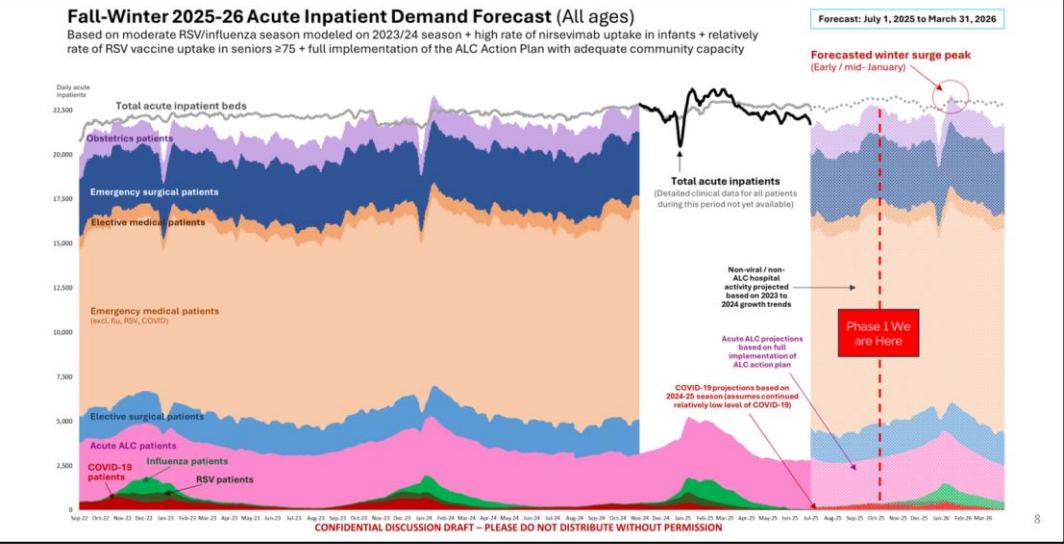
Additional Updates:

- A cluster of severe respiratory illness is reported, but lab confirmation is delayed due to backlog. Public concern is intensifying amid growing uncertainty about the nature, severity, and potential spread of the illness, as well as the lack of clear information about its origin and transmission.
- A healthcare worker in a pediatric unit also tested positive for measles, prompting contact tracing and staff isolation resulting in temporary staff shortages.
- Initial shipments of influenza vaccine are arriving this week, however a freezer malfunction compromised over 80% of supply which will not arrive until mid-November.
- Influenza vaccine shipment was further delayed due to courier strike and are arriving this week. A large community vaccine clinic is scheduled for next week, but 30% of immunization staff are unavailable due to illness/holiday.

- This slide sets the scene.
- Start the exercise by reading (or having someone read) the slide describing Scenario Phase 1.

Running the Exercise

Phase 1 Data for Context



- Present this visual for Phase 1 of the scenario. Note the “We are here” marker to better support the discussion.
- You may wish to print this chart out or enlarge it for Players’ ease of reference.

Phase 1 Discussion Questions

Immediate Questions

- What is your organization’s role and responsibilities in this situation, what is your initial response?
- Do you have enough information to act? Where would you get more information?
- Who would you need to contact given this information (external/internal)?
- What would be your next steps?
- What applicable plan/policy/procedure will you be using here? Do you know where to locate them?

Themes to Consider During Discussion

- Roles, Responsibilities, and Coordination
- Risk Communication and Public Messaging
- Health Human Resources & Surge Capacity
- Continuity of Operations Planning/Emergency Management
- Vaccines, Testing, & Therapeutics
- Outbreaks & Infection Prevention and Control
- Surveillance, Modelling & Evidence
- Community & Community Settings
- Supplies & Equipment
- Hospitals & Emergency Medical Services

- Direct the group to focus on answering these questions
- Once discussion has concluded, or total time allocated for that scenario has been reached move onto Phase 2 and repeat.

Running the Exercise

End of Exercise



Hot Wash: the immediate discussion and evaluation of an organization's performance following an exercise, training session, or major event, intended to identify strengths and weaknesses to guide future planning and responses.



Steps to lead a Hot Wash:

1. **End the exercise/introduce the hotwash:** Clearly identify that the exercise has concluded. Explain what a hot wash is and that a hot wash discussion will now take place.
2. **Restate exercise objectives:** Restate the exercise objectives to better frame the hot wash discussion.
3. **Review key events/actions:** Provide a summary of any key events/actions during the exercise to jog Players' memories.
4. **Introduce questions:** Guide Players through the hotwash questions, presenting questions one at a time.
5. **Summarize and clarify next steps:** Conclude the hot wash by summarizing key points and identifying any applicable next steps (i.e., follow-ups, distribution of findings etc.)
6. **Conclude the session:** Identify a clear end to the hotwash. Thank Players for participating.

Running the Exercise

Scenario Summary - Phases 1 and 2

	Phase 1 – October 7, 2025	Phase 2 - March 7th, 2026
Pathogen Report (Surge Info)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Influenza is still at inter-seasonal levels (<5% positivity)RSV is still low but rising and currently at 7% positivity. COVID-19 (12% positivity) continues to circulate at moderate levels.There are ongoing sporadic cases and clusters of measles across the province.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Influenza A and RSV activity is on the decline, but influenza B positivity rates are increasing, exceeding 10% in the last two weeks.COVID-19 levels have declined (10% positivity) and other respiratory viruses like human metapneumovirus, enterovirus/rhinovirus, and parainfluenza virus are still circulating.
Additional Information (Injects)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Influenza and COVID vaccines are available for high-risk groups, and influenza vaccine will soon be available for the general population.There has been low uptake of influenza, COVID and RSV vaccines in LTCH/RHs so far.Infant RSV immunization is continuing in hospitals and primary care.A healthcare worker in your pediatric unit tested positive for measles, prompting contact tracing and staff isolation resulting in temporary staff shortages.There are local complaints of difficulty accessing testing to support treatment for COVID-19 in your region.LTCH/RHs are seeing an increase in respiratory outbreaks and have run into challenges with expired testing kits and initiating outbreak protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none">A very long respiratory virus season has resulted in high occupancy for the past two months and is forecasted to remain high for the next several weeks.Home and Community Care clients in your region are experiencing delays in care due to ongoing snowstorm conditions and staff shortages. Hospital pressures are increasing post snowstorm due to demands across the system.Despite immunization efforts, a LTCH in your region reports the death of 5 seniors in 2 days due to COVID-19, whilst also dealing with a Norovirus outbreak, leading to persistent concerns among healthcare workers and residents in LTCH/RHs regarding the prolonged respiratory season.Staffing levels across all organizations are strained and resulting in intermittent ED service reductions in up to 10% of facilities.

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- To support the hotwash discussion, this slide provides a summary of the key events during the 3 phases of the scenario to jog Players' memories of what happened.
- You may wish to print this chart out or enlarge it for Players' ease of reference.

Hot Wash

Exercise Play

- What were key enablers identified during the exercise (e.g., existing tools/resources/processes/coordination mechanisms)?
- What are the top **3 key gaps/challenges** that your exercise group identified from this exercise?

Exercise Design

- What is the something from today's exercise that your group thinks future respiratory season exercises should **continue doing**?
- What is the something from today's exercise that your group thinks future respiratory season exercises should **do differently**?

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- Direct the group to focus on answering these questions

Concluding the Exercise



- Players are encouraged to apply the learnings from the exercise to contribute to future corrective action plans and/or health system readiness planning.
- Ensure the Scribe submits the completed Hotwash portion of the Reporting Form to EOCoperations.MOH@ontario.ca after the exercise.