

COVID-19 Contact Tracing Guide and FAQ for K-12 Schools

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

- Fever ($\geq 100.4^{\circ}\text{F}$) or chills
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Muscle or body aches
- New loss of taste or smell
- Cough (new, changed, or worsening)
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- Headache
- Fatigue
- Sore throat

What do I do if someone has COVID-19-like symptoms?

Follow the decision tree 1 for [“What to do if a Person is Symptomatic at School.”](#)

What defines a COVID-19 case?

A COVID-19 *case* is a person who tests positive with a molecular or antigen COVID-19 test.

When can someone who tests positive for COVID-19 return to school?

Any student or staff member with COVID-19 should *isolate* at home. This isolation guidance applies regardless of vaccination status.

If a student or staff member tests positive for SARS-CoV-2 by a molecular or antigen test, they can return to school when the following criteria are met:

- 5 days* have passed since symptom onset, or since positive test specimen collection date if no symptoms are present (*note: people who are severely ill or severely immunocompromised may need to isolate for [up to 20 days](#)); AND
- No symptoms are present, or symptoms are resolving; AND
- No fever within the past 24 hours without the use of fever reducing medications.

Students and staff should continue monitoring for symptoms and wearing a well-fitting mask around others through day 10 (days 6-10) both in and out of school, including during extracurricular and sports activities.

Individuals who have been in isolation may test on day 5 of their isolation period, but only if the above criteria for completing isolation have been met. If testing, an antigen test is recommended. If the test result is positive, they must continue to isolate until day 10. If the test result is negative, they may return to school but must continue to wear a well-fitting mask both in and out of school, at home and in the public, including during [extracurricular](#) and [sports](#) activities, to prevent potentially exposing others through day 10.

Follow the decision tree 1 for [“What to do if a Person is Symptomatic at School”](#) and reference the “Isolation” section of the [K-12 Requirements for 2021-2022](#) for additional information.

How do I know when someone who tests positive for COVID-19 was contagious?

This may also be referred to as a when a COVID-19 case was *infectious*. The period of time during which a COVID-19 case might transmit the virus, or expose others to the virus, is called their *contagious period*.

- If the individual who tested positive has symptoms, they are considered contagious 2 days before their first symptoms began and lasts until the end of their isolation period.
- If the individual who tested positive does not have symptoms, they are considered contagious 2 days before the day their test sample was collected and lasts until the end of their isolation period.

What is contact tracing?

Contact tracing helps protect students, staff, and their families by:

- Letting people know they may have been *exposed* to COVID-19 (that they are *close contacts*) and should monitor their health for signs and symptoms of COVID-19.
- Helping people who may have been *exposed* to COVID-19 get tested.
- Asking people to self-quarantine or participate in Test to Stay with modified quarantine if they are identified as a *close contact*.

How do I identify who is a close contact?

Use the [“COVID-19 Contact Tracing Checklist for K-12 Schools”](#) as a guide to identify close contacts in schools. For additional information, also see the “Identifying Close Contacts in the School Setting” section of the DOH [K-12 Supplemental Considerations](#) document.

More information about close contacts in schools:

While physical distancing seeks to limit exposure and transmission, the definition of a *close contact* is distinct from physical distancing requirements in schools or in other settings. CDC defines a close contact based on proximity and duration of exposure.

- In most settings, for COVID-19, a close contact is anyone who was within 6 feet of an infectious person for a total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period (for example, three individual 5-minute exposures for a total of 15 minutes). An infectious person can spread COVID-19 starting from 2 days before they have any symptoms or, if they are asymptomatic, 2 days before their sample that tested positive was collected.
- In the K-12 indoor classroom setting, or a structured outdoor setting (e.g., holding class outdoors with educator supervision), where masks are worn correctly and consistently, the close contact definition excludes individuals who were between 3 to 6 feet of an infectious person if both the infectious person and the exposed individual(s) correctly and consistently wore well-fitting masks the entire time.

If you have questions about what might be considered a close contact, work with your LHJ.

Which close contacts need to stay home?

Follow the decision tree 2 for how to “[Identify and Care for Close Contacts at School.](#)”

Quarantine is when someone who has been identified as a close contact stays home and away from others for the recommended period of time.

Who Must Quarantine:

Students and staff who come into close contact with someone with COVID-19 should quarantine for at least 5 days (day 0 through day 5) after their last close contact* with a person who has COVID-19 if they are in one of the following groups:

- Those who are not vaccinated or have not completed a primary vaccine series.
- Ages 18 or older and completed the primary series of recommended vaccine but have not received a recommended booster shot when eligible.

**For household exposures this would be the last day the person with COVID-19 is considered infectious.*

Who Does Not Need to Quarantine:

Students and staff who come into close contact with someone with COVID-19 do not need to quarantine if they:

- Are ages 18 or older and have received all recommended vaccine doses, including boosters and additional primary shots for some immunocompromised people.
- Are ages 5-17 years and completed the primary series of COVID-19 vaccines.
- Had confirmed COVID-19 within the last 90 days.

When can someone who is identified as a close contact return to school?

There are three quarantine options for close contacts. To reduce days out of the classroom and balance the need to limit transmission, DOH strongly recommends schools use the DOH Test to Stay protocol, which requires testing of eligible individuals.

1. For schools participating in a Test to Stay program: Students and staff eligible for Test to Stay may attend school, school-related extracurricular activities, and school-aged child care during their quarantine period if they participate in serial testing. This is known as *modified quarantine*. Students or staff who opt out of testing or who have accommodations that allow them to attend school and not wear a well-fitting mask or face shield with a drape or wrap are not eligible for modified quarantine. Please see the “Test to Stay” section of the [K-12 Supplemental Considerations](#) document for information on Test to Stay and modified quarantine.

Not all schools or districts have Test to Stay Programs, but those who do should use it to minimize exclusions from in-person instruction. Schools that want to start a Test to Stay program should contact [Learn to Return](#) for support if desired, but this is not a requirement.

2. For schools not participating in a Test to Stay program: Students or staff must quarantine at home. Quarantine can end after 5 full days beginning after the last close contact (the date of last close contact is considered day 0) if no symptoms have developed and after receiving a negative test result from a test taken no sooner than day 5.

Students and staff must wait to receive a negative test result from a test taken no sooner than day 5 post-exposure and provide the negative test documentation to the school before returning.

Negative test results may come from school testing programs, a health care provider, local health jurisdiction, pharmacy, or other community-based test site. Proof of a negative COVID-19 test includes the original, a copy, or a photo of a document or other communication from the test provider or laboratory that shows:

- The first and last names of the individual tested.
- The type of test performed (must be molecular or antigen).
- The date the specimen was collected (must be on or after day5 post-exposure).
- A negative result.

At-home tests should be considered in coordination with local public health.

Students and staff should continue monitoring for symptoms and wearing a well-fitting mask around others through day 10 (days 6-10) both in and out of school, including during [extracurricular](#) and [sports](#) activities.

3. Students and staff who choose not to test or do not get tested will need to quarantine for at least 10 days. Please see the “Quarantine” section of the DOH [K-12 Requirements](#) document for more information.

If unsure about which quarantine option should be followed, consult with your LHJ.

What is the difference between isolation and quarantine?

- Isolation separates people who are *sick* with a contagious disease like COVID-19 from people who are not sick.
- Quarantine separates people who were *exposed* to a contagious disease to see if they become sick. Quarantine can be longer than isolation because it takes people a few days to develop the infection. There are three options for quarantine outlined below. Consult with your local health department to choose the best option(s) for your school or district.
- Isolation and quarantine both work to slow the spread of COVID-19 by preventing further transmission of the virus by people who are sick or who have been exposed and may become sick.

More COVID-19 Information and Resources

Additional COVID-19 K-12 Resources

See the full Case Investigation and Contact Tracing Toolkit for schools on the DOH [COVID-19 Resources and Recommendations](#) page. Here you will also find the DOH [K-12 Requirements for 2021-2022](#) and [Supplemental Considerations to Mitigate COVID-19 Transmission in Schools](#).

General COVID-19 Resources

Stay up-to-date on the [current COVID-19 situation in Washington](#), [Governor Inslee's proclamations](#), [symptoms](#), [how it spreads](#), and [how and when people should get tested](#). See our [Frequently Asked Questions](#) for more information.

A person's race/ethnicity or nationality does not, itself, put them at greater risk of COVID-19. However, data are revealing that communities of color are being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. This is due to the effects of racism, and in particular, structural racism, that leave some groups with fewer opportunities to protect themselves and their communities. [Stigma will not help to fight the illness](#). Share only accurate information to keep rumors and misinformation from spreading.

- [WA State Department of Health 2019 Novel Coronavirus Outbreak \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [WA State Coronavirus Response \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [Find Your Local Health Jurisdiction](#)
- [CDC Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [Stigma Reduction Resources](#)

Have more questions? Call our COVID-19 Information hotline: **1-800-525-0127**

Monday – 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., Tuesday – Sunday and [observed state holidays](#), 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. For interpretative services, **press #** when they answer and **say your language**. For questions about your own health, COVID-19 testing, or testing results, please contact a health care provider.

To request this document in another format, call 1-800-525-0127. Deaf or hard of hearing customers, please call 711 ([Washington Relay](#)) or email civil.rights@doh.wa.gov.