Handling a Suspected or Confirmed Case of COVID-19: Information for Schools

Updated 11/19/2020

Latest update: The “Notification” section includes updated information for schools, child care, and youth programs, and a link to new template notification letters about close contacts and general notification.

This guidance supplements the 2020-2021 Planning Guide for Schools: Health Considerations for Navigating COVID-19. It is for the COVID-19 program coordinator and other designated staff who will be responsible for responding to COVID-19 concerns (e.g., school nurse, public health nurse) and coordinating with the regional support team; the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH); local public health; and tribal health regarding persons who test positive for COVID-19.

All school and school-associated program staff and families should know how to contact the COVID-19 program coordinator and other designated staff responsible for responding to COVID-19. Schools play a key role in identifying close contacts of people within a school building and school programs who have or are believed to have COVID-19.

This document offers detailed guidance to answer the following questions:

- What should a district do if it is notified about someone with symptoms (e.g., student, teacher, or staff) who is at home, riding on school transportation, or at school?
- What should a district do if a student, teacher, or staff member – or someone who lives with them or who is a one of their household members or close contact of theirs – tests positive for COVID-19?
- When does someone need to stay at home (quarantine) or to stay at home and away from others in the house (isolate) because of COVID-19?
Key terms

Case: A person who has tested positive for COVID-19.

Case investigation: The steps taken by a trained health worker when calling a person who tests positive for COVID-19 to ask about their symptoms, how they may have been infected, and who they may have infected.

Close contact/close contact exposure: A close contact is ANY person who lives with someone who tests positive for COVID-19 or who has spent a total of 15 minutes or more in a 24-hour period within about 6 feet of anyone who has COVID-19. However, even shorter periods of time or longer distances can result in spread of the virus. For example, a classroom of students who are together regularly could be considered close contacts, even if sitting 6 feet apart, because of the length of time spent together in a room doing many different activities. The case investigation staff will take into consideration types of activities and interactions, the setting, and other things, such as whether the person was actively coughing and/or sneezing.

Community spread: Community spread means that people in the community are infected with the virus and spreading it to others, who may not know how or where they got infected.

Contact tracing: Talking with people who are infected with COVID-19 to learn who had close contact with them and then telling close contacts they may have been infected. Contact tracing is a key element in stopping or limiting the spread of COVID-19. For more information on contact tracing at MDH, visit Tracing COVID-19 (www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/tracing.html).

Exposed: This means coming in contact with the virus. The virus is thought to spread when someone who is infected coughs, sneezes, or exhales. This is why people should stay at least 6 feet from each other.

Incubation period: This is the time from close contact with the virus to development of infection. For COVID-19, this period ranges from two to 14 days.

Infectious period: This is the period of time a person with COVID-19 can spread the virus to others. It includes the two days before a person has symptoms, and at least 10 days after symptoms start. For a person without symptoms, the infectious period is two days before the date the person tests positive for COVID-19 and at least 10 days after.

Isolation: Isolation is when a person who tests positive for COVID-19 stays at home and away from others, even those living in the same home. This prevents them from spreading the disease to others. The isolation period for COVID-19 is at least 10 days from start of symptoms, or from the test date if the person has no symptoms, and until 24 hours without fever, without using medicine that reduces fever, and until symptoms have improved. The period could be longer if a person’s symptoms do not improve.

Quarantine: Quarantine is when a person who is a close contact of someone with COVID-19 stays at home and away from others for 14 days to see if they will develop COVID-19. This prevents someone who does not yet know if they have the disease from spreading it to others if it turns out they have it.
The time at home does not change with a negative test result, since an infection could still develop after getting tested. The time during which someone may get sick ranges from two to 14 days. The person must stay home for these 14 days.

**Transmission:** This is the term used to describe when an illness spreads between people.

[Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Glossary of Terms](www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/materials/glossary.html)

### Preparing to handle possible COVID-19 cases

Schools and school districts must have a system in place to allow staff and families to self-report to the school if they or their student(s) have symptoms of COVID-19 or get a positive test result for COVID-19, or if they had close contact with someone with COVID-19. This system must follow law and privacy policies, including but not limited to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), as applicable.

- Choose a person for both students and staff to contact and self-report. It may or may not be the same person.
- Determine how families, caregivers, students, and staff will communicate with the designated staff person (e.g., email, phone line).
- Determine how you will educate and communicate this new process to the school community.

Communicate to staff and families the importance of sharing this information to help limit the spread of COVID-19. It is expected that if the child or student is excluded from school, they are excluded from participation in all other community-based activities (e.g., sports, clubs, dance, child care).

### COVID-19 symptoms

Symptoms of COVID-19 can look like many other illnesses children get. The symptoms for children can look different than symptoms for adults. Symptoms consistent with COVID-19 fall into two groups:

- **More common symptoms are one or more of these:** fever of 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit or higher; new cough or a cough that gets worse; difficulty/hard time breathing; and new loss of taste or smell.
- **Less common symptoms are two or more of these:** sore throat; nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea; chills; muscle pain; extreme fatigue/feeling very tired; new severe/very bad headache; and new nasal congestion/stuffy or runny nose.

For more information, see the [COVID-19 Decision Tree for People in Schools, Youth, and Child Care Programs](www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/exguide.pdf).
Contact tracing, quarantine, and isolation

It is important to note that testing, combined with contact tracing and staying at home and away from all others helps to control the spread of COVID-19. All positive test results are reported to MDH by the testing laboratory. When a person gets a positive COVID-19 test result, MDH, local public health, or tribal health will reach out to investigate where that person may have been and with whom they have come in contact, in addition to providing any needed support so that the person can remain safely at home and away from all others.

It is very important that people who test positive for the virus give correct, complete information. Those who are identified as close contacts of the person who tested positive will be notified by either MDH, local public health, tribal health, or their employer/school by phone and/or via a notification letter, email, or text.

Close contacts play an important role in stopping continued viral spread by staying at home for 14 days, and not attending school, work, sports, or any other activities during this time. By staying home, close contacts can stop additional spread of the virus while waiting to see if they get symptoms. This helps to protect their families, schools, and community.


Isolation for people who test positive for COVID-19

People who test positive for COVID-19 must stay at home until all three of these things are true:

- They feel better. Their cough, shortness of breath, or other symptoms are better; and,
- It has been 10 days since they first felt sick; and,
- They have had no fever for at least 24 hours, without using medicine that lowers fever.

Repeat testing for COVID-19 is not recommended before returning to work, school, or other activities. Return to school, sports, or any other programming should be based on time (minimum 10 days), no fever, and improved symptoms.

Quarantine for close contacts of someone with COVID-19

MDH, local public health, or tribal health team members will help the school identify the people who had close contact with each person who tests positive for COVID-19 and will provide guidance about staying home for 14 days to prevent further spread of illness.

Close contacts cannot return to school, sports, or any other activities outside their home for 14 days, even if they get tested and receive a negative test result before the 14 days have passed. Staying home for 14 days is important, because it can take between two to 14 days for someone who has been in contact with COVID-19 to get sick. People in quarantine who go on to develop symptoms and/or test
positive for COVID-19 must then stay home and separate from others for a minimum of 10 days from the start of symptoms, OR from the date they tested positive if they do not have symptoms, and until at least 24 hours have passed with no fever (without the aid of medication) and their symptoms improve.

More information on the importance of quarantine is available at CDC: When to Quarantine (www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/quarantine.html).

---

### Special considerations when identifying close contacts

#### Classroom setup

- If desks are forward facing and placed 6 feet apart; students remain at their desks throughout the duration of class; and the teacher remains at the front of the class at least 6 feet away from any students, there may be no close contacts in the classroom.

- If desks are placed less than 6 feet apart, students remain at their desks throughout the duration of class, and the teacher remains at the front of the class at least 6 feet away from any students, those students within the 6-foot radius of the person with COVID-19 could be close contacts.

- If the classroom is arranged such that students are moving freely throughout the classroom, without maintaining a 6-foot distance, and are interacting with the teacher, it is likely that all students and the teacher would be close contacts.

#### Student population

A student’s ability to stay at least 6 feet apart in a classroom and avoid other forms of close contact with students, teachers, and staff could vary considerably with age and developmental status, which would be considered when identifying close contacts within a classroom or school setting.

#### Grouped students (Cohorts)

When working to identify close contacts, consider whether students and staff were kept together as a group during classes, lunch periods, recess, parent pick-up and drop-off, carpooling, and busing; on sports teams; at bus stops and extracurricular activities, and in social groups outside of school. If students are kept together consistently as a group that does not intermix with other groups, close contacts could be limited to only members of the group. Specialist teachers who come into the classroom may or may not be considered close contacts, depending on their involvement with a class and individual students, the activities conducted, and the structure of the lesson. Specialists should keep daily records of their level of interaction with students.
Cafeteria

Social distancing practices should be maintained for lunch, and seating assignments should be documented daily.

- If students are distanced within 6 feet of each other, then contacts would include the entire lunch table or a 6-foot radius around the person who tested positive.
- If students are distanced more than 6 feet apart, then there would be no contacts.

Transportation

- Consider the following for rides 15 minutes or longer (and any combination of rides that add up to 15 minutes or longer):
  - If bus seating is not assigned and documented on a daily basis, all riders would be considered contacts.
  - If bus seating is assigned and documented, daily riders in the same row as the case, the two rows ahead, and the two rows behind would be considered contacts.
  - Drivers who are consistently spaced at least 6 feet away from all passengers (with the exception of students entering/exiting) would not be considered a close contact.
- If the bus ride is longer than 30 minutes or cumulatively 30 minutes or longer within the course of a day all people (students and driver) on the bus, even those greater than 6 feet from the positive case, would be considered close contacts.

Handling a confirmed case of COVID-19

A designated staff person (e.g., school nurse, director, and coordinator) must be responsible for responding to COVID-19 concerns and coordinating with the regional support team; MDH; local public health; and tribal health regarding people who test positive for COVID-19. All staff and families should know who the school’s designated person is and how to contact them to report a positive test result.

School staff may hear about a positive test result from a staff member or parent/guardian before MDH is notified. It is important to report when someone has tested positive for COVID-19. Staff should not report suspected cases of COVID-19. They should report only when a person’s lab test is positive, and only when the person is a student or staff member who is attending or working in their school. If the school’s learning model is distance learning, schools need to report the person (student or staff) only if they were in the school during the previous two-weeks.

When you know that a lab test has confirmed that a student or staff member has COVID-19, please reach out to the MDH follow-up team by completing this form: COVID-19 Information Submission Form for K-12 Schools, Childcare, or Youth Camps (redcap.health.state.mn.us/redcap/surveys/?s=79FPADEAMF). This is a secure system to report names, addresses, phone numbers and other information. MDH monitors this report system seven days a week and provides timely guidance.
Complete the form even if you do not have all the information or if you are working with local public health. The name and phone number of the person who tested positive for COVID-19 is always needed. The form will ask for the following information:

- Contact information for the facility (school or the program’s designated contact person).
- Facility name, address, city, ZIP code, phone number, and type of school or program.
- Current learning model in place at the school where the person who tested positive works or attends.
- Current total enrollment in the facility or program.
- Current total number of staff at the facility or program.
- Total number of classrooms at the facility or program, if applicable.
- Whether the location has had previous cases.
- Whether the case is a child/student/attendee or staff member.
  - Work location of the staff member, if applicable (private office, shared office, classroom, other).
  - The number of people in a shared classroom or shared office with the case.
- The full name and phone number of the person who tested positive for COVID-19.
- The onset date of symptoms.
- Whether the person worked at or attended the program or facility while they had symptoms.
- Whether the person worked at or attended the program or facility during the two days before the onset of symptoms or a positive test.
- Date(s) the person worked at or attended the school or program in the seven days before symptom onset or date of positive test.
- Numbers of students and staff identified as close contacts.
- If applicable, the groups/agencies you have contacted about the person who tested positive for COVID-19.
- The type of follow-up you are requesting from MDH:
  - High priority/need help with contact tracing.
  - Medium priority/have questions, but contact tracing is in progress.
  - Low priority/contact tracing and/or exclusions have been completed by school/reporter.

Once the form is completed and submitted, MDH, local public health and/or tribal health will reach out to discuss the situation based on the priority level identified in the form. The school's designated staff will identify close contacts and determine next steps, consulting with MDH, local public health, and tribal health, as needed. Schools will need to notify the close contact(s) using the templates in the Notification section of this document. In the meantime, it will be important for staff to take the following steps to identify those who may be close contacts. Schools should ensure that contact information needed to conduct any necessary follow-up is up to date for students and staff.
Gather and review the student or staff member’s activity. This should look back two days from the date symptoms started or from the date they tested positive if there were no symptoms. Consider:

- Arrival and departure time (include all locations worked at or attended).
- Bus route information and transportation attendance, carpool, and safe route walkers.
- Class or work schedule, rosters, and seating charts.
- Lunchtime, recess, extracurricular, and other activities.
- The length of time the person who tested positive was on-site while potentially infectious.
- Close contacts of the person who tested positive.
- The classroom environment and activities of the person who tested positive (e.g., was the person part of a group that stayed together or a class, were classes or groups intermixing).

Evaluate if it is necessary to clean and disinfect spaces visited by the person who tested positive.

- Review cleaning guidance at COVID-19 Cleaning and Disinfecting Guidance for Schools and Child Care Programs (www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/clean.html).
- As long as routine cleaning and disinfecting have been done regularly, additional cleaning measures may not be necessary.
- Depending on when the person with COVID-19 was last on-site, it may be difficult to know what areas they were in and what objects or surfaces they may have touched after they became sick.
## Basic actions for COVID-19 events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Location of Event</th>
<th>Response/Action for Positive Test Result (see Handling positive cases of COVID-19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Event #1: Child, student, or staff member (person) has symptoms of COVID-19 | If a person has symptoms and is **at home:**  
- Stay home.  
- Monitor at home or seek medical evaluation and/or testing.  
- Siblings and household members should remain at home until person who is ill is evaluated and/or tested.  

If a student has symptoms and is **on the bus or at school:**  
- Ensure face covering is worn.  
- Keep student who has symptoms away from others.  
- Evaluate symptoms and use COVID-19 Decision Tree for People in Schools, Youth, and Child Care Programs (www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/exguide.pdf).  
- Send home as appropriate, following the COVID-19 Decision Tree, and ensure the student does not ride on a bus with others.  
- Seek medical evaluation and testing or monitor at home.  
- Follow COVID-19 Decision Tree for People in Schools, Youth, and Child Care Programs for return to school or program.  

If a **staff member** has symptoms and is **at school:**  
- Notify school leadership.  
- Go home.  
- Seek medical evaluation and testing or monitor at home.  
- Follow COVID-19 Decision Tree for People in Schools, Youth, and Child Care Programs for return to school or program.  

|       |       | Gather information needed, contact local public health and/or regional support team.  
|-------|-------| Complete the online case submission form.  
|       |       | Evaluate cleaning and disinfection needs.  
|       |       | Identify close contacts, consult with MDH, local public health and/or tribal health.  
|       |       | **Notify close contacts.**  

| Event #2: Child, student, or staff member (person) had close contact in school, at a community activity, or in their household with someone who tested positive for COVID-19. | If a person is **at home** when they learn they are a **close contact:**  
- Stay at home.  
- Get tested five to seven days after their last contact with the person.  
- Siblings and household members do not need to stay home unless they are also a close contact.  
- Follow COVID-19 Decision Tree for People in Schools, Youth, and Child Care Programs for return to school or program.  

If a person is **at school** when they learn they were in **close contact** with a person who tested positive for COVID-19:  
- Check if the person has symptoms.  
- Ensure face covering is worn.  
- Isolate from others.  
- Send home. Ensure students who are close contacts do not ride on a bus with others. Stay at home and/or seek testing five to seven days after they last had contact with the person.  
- Follow COVID-19 Decision Tree for People in Schools, Youth, and Child Care Programs for return to school or program.  

|       |       | This section does not apply to the event.  

---

9 of 11
Notification

Schools need to develop a process to notify students, families, and staff. Districts must notify students, their families, and staff members who are identified during a case investigation as having had close contact in school with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 and the contact happened while the ill person could spread the disease.

Schools should also determine when and how they will use a general notification to let students, families, and staff know when a person who has tested positive for COVID-19 has been identified as being present in the school during the time that they could spread the disease to others. Schools will have to determine how broadly to use a general notification, whether to notify specific grade levels, a specific school site, or the entire district.

Schools may choose how to send the notification (e.g., letter, email, and phone). Schools can access template letters at COVID-19 Notification Letter Templates for Schools, Child Care, and Youth Programs (https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/letters/). Four different template letters are available, with translations in Hmong, Karen, Russian, Somali, Spanish and Vietnamese.

- Notification for students who are identified as a close contact.
- Notification for staff who are identified as a close contact.
- General notification for students/families about a person in the school community who has tested positive for COVID-19.
- General notification for staff about a person in the school community who has tested positive for COVID-19.

Privacy notice: To protect the privacy of the person who has tested positive for COVID-19, any notification should avoid using any information that may identify the person. When using these templates, be sure to customize them by including the pertinent information related to the case (e.g., the school name, dates, and contact information) but do not make other edits, as these templates have been through an extensive review process at MDH.

Consider providing these resources when making notifications


Resources related to employment concerns

HANDLING A SUSPECTED OR CONFIRMED POSITIVE CASE OF COVID-19: INFORMATION FOR SCHOOLS

- Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry: Worker protections related to COVID-19
- (Minnesota Statutes: 144.4196 Employee Protection
  [https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/144.4196])
  Employers should be aware that Minnesota state law provides employment protections when a person is in isolation for public health purposes.

Resources

The COVID-19 program coordinator, school nurse, or designated staff can use the resources below to support their communication with children, students, attendees, parent/caregivers, and staff about COVID-19. These resources can be used to prepare for someone within the school or program testing positive for COVID-19 and working with the regional support team and/or local public health.

- Materials and Resources for COVID-19 Response
  (www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/materials/index.html)
  Video PSAs, print materials, and translated documents to assist with preparing for and responding to COVID-19.
- COVID-19 Decision Tree for People in Schools, Youth, and Child Care Programs
  (www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/exguide.pdf)
- COVID-19 Attendance Guide for Parents and Families:
  (www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/attendance.pdf)
- Home Screening Tool for COVID-19 Symptoms
  (www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/homescreen.pdf)
- What to Do While You Wait for a COVID-19 Test Result
  (www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/waiting.pdf)
- CDC: COVID-19 Contact Tracing Communications Toolkit for Health Departments
- What to Do if You Have Had Close Contact With a Person With COVID-19
  (www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/contact.pdf)