

Back to school during COVID-19: FAQ

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COVID-19 symptoms and illness at school

What happens if someone comes to school with symptoms of COVID-19?

Parents/guardians are required to assess students daily for symptoms of COVID-19 before the start of the school day using the daily screening questionnaire (checklist), available here: <https://www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/edc-covid-19-screening-questionnaire-english.pdf>

Anyone who is experiencing symptoms cannot enter a school.

What if a student or school staff member has symptoms that can be explained by a pre-existing medical condition, like allergies? Can they still go to school?

If a child develops symptoms that could be caused by either COVID-19 or by a known pre-existing condition (e.g., allergies), the child should be tested at least once for COVID-19 to confirm that it is not the source of their symptoms before entering or returning to school. These symptoms will then be considered as part of the student's baseline health. As long as these symptoms do not change, the student can continue to attend school. Repeat testing is not needed unless the nature of the symptom changes (e.g., a chronic cough worsens).

Written confirmation by a physician that a student or staff member's symptoms are due to a chronic illness is not needed.

What happens if someone develops COVID-19 symptoms while they are at school?

The symptomatic person must be masked and isolated immediately (ideally in a separate room). They must be picked up as soon as possible.

All surfaces or items they touched need to be disinfected or stored away from others for 72 hours, and any isolation space must be thoroughly disinfected.

If a student has symptoms of COVID-19, can their asymptomatic siblings (or others in the household) go to school?

Yes, asymptomatic siblings or family members can continue to go to school, unless:

- The student with symptoms tests positive for COVID-19
- The student with symptoms is also a close contact (see definition below) of a positive case (in which case, the siblings or family members should all isolate until the test result is reported).

Close contacts at school

What is considered a close contact in a school?

Generally, all students who share a classroom with a student who was infectious with COVID-19 are considered close contacts. This is a cautious approach to identifying close contacts in order to minimize the risk of transmission. Children in a classroom are considered part of a cohort for contact tracing. For more information on cohorts, please refer to the [Guidance for School Re-entry](#). Parents/guardians will be notified by AHS Public Health when students are identified as close contacts.

Teachers/staff are assessed on a case by case basis by AHS Public Health. If a teacher/staff consistently maintains a two meter distance from others at all times and there has been no direct contact with the infected person, they would not be considered a close contact.

How will close contacts be determined in a school setting?

AHS Public Health will work with schools to contact students/parents/guardians who have been in close contact with a positive case (e.g., grade-level cohorts or other class groups), and to determine which school staff members are close contacts.

What is considered a close contact on a bus?

Anyone seated within two rows on a bus (either in front of, behind or beside the case) could be considered a close contact. If students move around the bus or don't stay in their seat, then all individuals on the bus would be considered close contacts.

If students or staff are wearing masks at school, are they still considered close contacts?

Wearing a mask helps to prevent respiratory droplets from contaminating other people or surfaces. Masks are helpful in preventing the spread of COVID with small amounts of contact (e.g., standing beside each other for a short time).

However, wearing a mask is not considered enough to guarantee prevention of the spread of COVID-19 among students or staff in close contact with a positive case.

Staying home from school (isolation)

When do students or staff need to isolate?

Anyone with symptoms should not be at school if they are ill.

Anyone with symptoms of fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, sore throat or runny nose, MUST legally isolate for 10 days after the onset of symptoms and should be tested for COVID-19. They cannot go to school or attend any public place.

After testing, there are further instructions at [ahs.ca/results](https://www.ahs.ca/results) about the actions that someone must take based on their test results.

Anyone who is identified as a close contact of a confirmed positive case must isolate for 14 days from the date of exposure. They cannot go to school or attend any public place. Even if they test negative for COVID-19, they must stay in isolation for 14 days.

Why do close contacts need to isolate for 14 days, even if they test negative for COVID-19?

When someone is exposed to a positive case, it may take up to 14 days for the symptoms to develop, or for a positive test result. They need to stay home because they are at higher chance of being infected and COVID-19 is able to spread before developing symptoms. If a close contact develops symptoms after testing negative for COVID-19, they should be tested again.

If a child does not have symptoms but is identified as a close contact of a positive case, do others in their household need to isolate (e.g., siblings, other family members)?

No. Contacts of close contacts do not need to isolate as long as they do not have symptoms.

COVID-19 cases, alerts, or outbreaks at school

What should I do if I am concerned my child has been exposed to COVID-19 at school?

Students may continue to attend school if they are well, unless notified by AHS that they are a contact of a confirmed case.

Schools will communicate to students/parents/guardians if there is a case of COVID-19 at their child's school. AHS will identify and notify all close contacts of the positive case.

Parents/guardians are encouraged to monitor their children for symptoms and can call Health Link at 811 if they have questions about their child's health.

Parents/guardians should talk to the teacher or school administrator if they have questions about specific health measures in the school, or the school re-entry plan.

What happens when a school student or staff member tests positive?

AHS receives positive case results directly from the lab. The staff member or student (or their parent/guardian) is informed of their positive test result, and provided with guidance, by AHS Public Health.

The positive case is required to isolate at home. They cannot attend school until Public Health determines that they are no longer infectious.

How will schools be notified of positive cases in staff or students?

AHS notifies the positive individual and collects information to help identify any close contacts.

The school will only be notified if the positive case attended school while they were infectious or if the positive case likely acquired COVID-19 from the school. The school will be asked to help identify any students or staff that may have been exposed at school so AHS Public Health can notify them. All other staff, students and parents/guardians will be notified of the case or outbreak by the school.

If the positive case did not attend school while they were infectious or did not likely acquire COVID-19 from the school, the school would not be notified by AHS.

What happens if there is one case of COVID-19 in a school?

One case will trigger an “alert status” and the school will work with AHS contact tracing to identify close contacts.

As directed by AHS, the school will send out a letter to the students/parents/guardians and staff to notify them of the alert.

How many cases do there need to be before an outbreak is declared?

Two or more cases of COVID-19 in a school within a 14 day period is considered an outbreak.

As directed by AHS, the school will send out a letter to the students/parents/guardians and staff to notify them of the outbreak.

Will the school be closed if there is an outbreak?

Public health measures for outbreak management are based on recommendations of the Zone Medical Officer of Health. In the majority of situations school closure would not be required to manage the disease control aspects of an outbreak. Extra precautions of short term operational shifts to at-home or online learning may be taken by the school, in consultation with Alberta Education.

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Decisions on the need for alternate instructional delivery plans or school closures will be made by Government in collaboration with the school and the local Medical Officer of Health.

When does an alert end?

If there are no more cases of COVID-19 at the school, the alert would be over 14 days after the onset date of the single case.

When does an outbreak end?

Typically, an outbreak is declared over after 28 days with no cases, but Medical Officers of Health will work with individual schools to declare an end.

Returning to school after COVID-19 symptoms, testing, or cases

When can a teacher, staff member or student return to school following a negative COVID-19 test?

A symptomatic person who tests negative can return to school when their symptoms resolve **except if** they have been identified as a close contact of a confirmed case.

An asymptomatic person who tests negative can return to school right away **except if** they have been identified as a close contact of a confirmed case.

Close contacts of cases need to complete a 14 day isolation period.

Proof of a negative test result is not a requirement of Alberta Health or Alberta Health Services.

When can a student or staff member who is identified as a close contact return to school?

Close contacts can return to school after they have completed the 14-day isolation period as long as they haven't developed any symptoms.

If a student or staff member is required to isolate, how will the school know when it is safe for them to return?

When a student or staff member is required to isolate, that person (or their parents/guardians) is responsible for following instructions and not attending any public place until it is safe to do so. It is up to them to follow the isolation requirements, and to communicate with the school about when it is safe for them to return.

Masks at school

Who is eligible for an exception from wearing a mask? Is proof of an exception needed at school?

The vast majority of staff and students should be capable of wearing a mask at school.

Family physicians can provide advice regarding medical reasons where masking is not recommended, however, proof of not being able to wear a mask at school is not required by Alberta Health or Alberta Health Services.

Discomfort is not a good reason to avoid wearing a mask. We all share accountability for creating a safe school environment. This includes doing the right thing to protect ourselves, our children and each other.

General masking advice is available from AHS here:

<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page17166.aspx>

Alberta Health has masking guidance for schools here:

<https://open.alberta.ca/publications/covid-19-information-guidance-school-re-entry-scenario-1>

with additional information here:

<https://www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/COVID-19-implementing-school-re-entry-guidance.pdf>

School authorities and individual schools may have additional requirements.