Purpose

This document answers common questions about going to school during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a resource for:

- Teachers, school administrators and school authority leaders
- AHS staff who work with schools e.g. school nurses, public health inspectors, health promotion facilitators

This document aligns with guidance and health measures for K-12 schools from the Government of Alberta. If this document differs from Government of Alberta documents, the Government documents should be followed.

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1. What happens if someone going to school has symptoms of COVID-19?

Anyone with COVID-19 symptoms is not permitted to enter a school.

Parents/guardians must complete a daily health check with their child before the start of the school day.

School staff and visitors are also required to complete a daily health check before coming to school.

Daily health checks for children and adults are available here:
   • Alberta Health Daily Checklist
   • Translated versions can be found at K-12 learning during COVID-19, under the headings “Attending School Safely” and “Daily Health Check”.

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

The person must be masked and isolated immediately in a separate room or kept at least 2 metres away from others. They must be picked up from school as soon as possible.

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

3. What if someone has COVID-19 symptoms that can be explained by a pre-existing medical condition, like allergies? Can they still go to school?

They should stay home and be tested at least once for COVID-19 to confirm that the virus is not the source of their symptoms. These symptoms will then be considered as part of their baseline health status and they can continue to go to school as long as their symptoms do not change. Repeat testing is only needed if symptoms change (e.g., a chronic cough worsens) or new symptoms develop.

It is not necessary for a physician to confirm in writing that someone’s symptoms are due to chronic illness. Schools should document underlying health conditions that have been brought to their attention.

Parent/guardian concerns

4. What should parents/guardians do if they are concerned about COVID-19 at their child’s school?

Students may continue to attend school if they are well, unless notified that they are a close contact of someone who tested positive for COVID-19.
Schools will communicate to parents/guardians if there is a case of COVID-19 at the school. AHS will identify and notify all close contacts of the person who tested positive for COVID-19.

Parents/guardians are encouraged to watch 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.

**COVID-19 cases, alerts, or outbreaks at school**

5. **What happens when a student or school staff member tests positive for COVID-19?**

   The staff member or student (or their parent/guardian) is informed of their test result via text, voice message or phone call and provided with guidance by AHS.

   Everyone who tests positive for COVID-19 is required to isolate at home. They cannot go to school until they have completed their isolation.

6. **How will schools be notified when staff or students test positive for COVID-19?**

   First, AHS notifies the person who tested positive for COVID-19 (or their parent/guardian) and collects information to help identify any close contacts.

   Next, the school is notified by AHS if the person was at school while they were infectious, or if it is likely that they acquired COVID-19 at school. If the person was not at school while they were infectious, or it is unlikely that they acquired COVID-19 at school, the school will not be notified by AHS.

7. **When will school staff and parents/guardians be notified about COVID-19 cases at school?**

   All parents/guardians and staff will receive a letter from the school (typically via email) when the first case of COVID-19 in the school is confirmed by AHS. An additional letter is sent if two or more cases of COVID-19 are confirmed by AHS.

   Schools will send these letters to parents/guardians and staff when directed by AHS.

8. **How many cases do there need to be before an outbreak is declared in a school?**

   AHS starts an investigation when there are two or more cases in a school.

   The following terms are used to describe school cases:
   - Alert (1 case)
   - Alert (2-4 cases)
• Outbreak (5-9 cases)
• Outbreak (10+ cases)

9. When does an alert for a single case (Alert 1) end?

If there are no more cases of COVID-19 at the school within 14 days of the alert being declared, the school will no longer be on an Alert (1).

10. When does an AHS investigation for multiple cases end?

Typically, an investigation is declared over after 28 days with no new cases. This 28 day period begins from the date that symptoms started in the last case. Medical Officers of Health will work with individual schools to declare an end date.

11. Will schools be closed if there are multiple cases of COVID-19?

When schools have multiple cases of COVID-19, public health measures are based on recommendations of the Zone Medical Officer of Health. School closures are not required in the majority of situations. Short term shifts to at-home learning, due to operational reasons such as limited available staff may be taken by the school, in consultation with Alberta Education.

Decisions on the need for alternate instructional delivery plans or school closures are made by the Government of Alberta in collaboration with the school / school authority.

Close contacts at school

12. How will people know if they are a close contact of someone at school who tests positive for COVID-19?

AHS works with schools to identify students and staff members who have been in close contact with a person who tests positive for COVID-19. AHS will request that schools provide a list of close contacts, and then AHS will notify staff and parents/guardians of students identified as close contacts.

13. Who is considered a close contact in a school?

Generally, the entire classroom is considered to be close contacts of someone who tests positive for COVID-19. This is a cautious approach to identifying close contacts in order to minimize the risk of transmission. Close contacts will be determined by an AHS Public Health investigation. Parents/guardians will be notified by AHS when students are identified as close contacts.

Teachers and other school staff are considered on a case-by-case basis:

• If a student in a class tests positive for COVID-19, a teacher or school staff member who regularly interacts within 2 meters of the students in this class would be considered a close contact.
Going to school during COVID-19: FAQ

- If a teacher or school staff member can confirm that they were not within 2 meters of their students for more than 15 minutes cumulative during the time the person who tested positive for COVID-19 was infectious, they would not be considered a close contact.
- If a teacher or staff member tests positive and can confirm they were not within 2 meters of any of their students for more than 15 minutes cumulative during their infectious period, the students would not be considered close contacts.

14. Who is considered a close contact on a school bus?

A close contact on a school bus is anyone seated within three rows of a person who tests positive for COVID-19. This includes those seated in front of, behind or beside the person who tests positive, on both sides of the aisle.

If students move around the bus, do not stay in their seats or if the bus does not have a seating plan, then everyone on the bus would be considered a close contact.

More information about busing can be found at COVID-19 guidance and health measures for K-12 schools.

15. Are students or staff still considered close contacts if they were wearing masks?

Yes, mask use does not change the identification of close contacts. Masks are helpful in preventing the spread of COVID-19 with small amounts of contact (e.g., standing beside each other for a short time), but they do not guarantee prevention of the spread of COVID-19 among people in close contact with someone who tests positive for COVID-19.

16. What is an EI number? Do close contacts need an EI number to book a COVID-19 test?

An EI (Epidemiological Investigation) number is a way that AHS identifies cases that may be connected to each other. AHS will provide an EI number in letters to close contacts when it is applicable (for example, when there are two or more cases in a school). Not everyone has an EI number.

An EI number is requested but not required when booking a COVID-19 test. People can help make contact tracing more efficient by providing the EI number when they have one.

Staying home from school (isolation and quarantine)

17. What is the difference between isolation and quarantine?

Both isolation and quarantine are about reducing contacts with other people, staying home and avoiding situations where the virus could spread.
- **Isolation** is when people who are sick with COVID-19 symptoms or who have tested positive for COVID-19 stay home and away from others to avoid spreading illness.
• **Quarantine** is when people who might have been exposed to COVID-19 stay home and away from others in case they become sick or are able to spread illness to others.

More information about isolation and quarantine can be found at [ahs.ca/isolation](ahs.ca/isolation).

**18. When do students and school staff need to isolate?**

People who test positive for COVID-19 are legally required to isolate for at least 10 days. More details are available [here](ahs.ca/isolation).

Students or staff members with symptoms of COVID-19 should not go to school or any public place. More information about specific symptoms and isolation requirements is available [here](ahs.ca/isolation).

The AHS Parent COVID-19 Guide also provides information about isolation for students based on specific symptoms of COVID-19.

[ahs.ca/results](ahs.ca/results) provides isolation instructions based on COVID-19 test results.

**19. UPDATED When do students and school staff need to quarantine?**

Students and school staff need to quarantine when:

- They have been identified as a close contact of someone who tests positive for COVID-19
- They have travelled outside of Canada

They must stay in quarantine for 14 days from the date of last exposure to a person who tests positive for COVID-19, or the date of return from travel. They cannot go to school or any public place. **Even if they test negative for COVID-19, they must stay in quarantine for 14 days.**

People who have been immunized may have different quarantine requirements. See [Quarantine for Immunized Close Contacts](ahs.ca/covidschools) for more information.

**20. UPDATED Why do close contacts need to quarantine for 14 days, even if they test negative for COVID-19?**

When someone is exposed to COVID-19, it may take up to 14 days for symptoms to develop, or for a positive test result. The reason someone needs to stay home even if they test negative for COVID-19 is because they are at a higher chance of being infected with COVID-19 and may spread the virus even if they do not have symptoms.

People who have been immunized may have different quarantine requirements. See [Quarantine for Immunized Close Contacts](ahs.ca/covidschools) for more information.
If a close contact develops symptoms after testing negative for COVID-19, they should be tested again.

More information about quarantine can be found at [ahs.ca/isolation](https://ahs.ca/isolation).

**21. UPDATED** What should schools do if someone who is a close contact has questions about quarantine requirements based on their own health history?

People who have questions about quarantine requirements based on their own health history (such as previously testing positive for COVID-19) can call Health Link at 811. A Registered Nurse will provide specific advice based on the person’s circumstances.

People who have been immunized may have different quarantine requirements. See [Quarantine for Immunized Close Contacts](https://ahs.ca/isolation) for more information.

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

**22. When can a student or staff member who had COVID-19 symptoms return to school?**

Anyone who is feeling unwell should stay at home.

Anyone who enters a school is required to complete a daily health check. Daily health checks for children and adults are available here:

- [Alberta Health Daily Checklist](https://ahs.ca/isolation)
- Translated versions can be found at [K-12 learning during COVID-19](https://ahs.ca/isolation), under the headings “Attending School Safely” and “Daily Health Check”.

Anyone required to [isolate](https://ahs.ca/isolation) must complete their isolation period prior to returning to school.

The AHS [Parent COVID-19 Guide](https://ahs.ca/isolation) provides information about when **students** can return to school based on specific symptoms of COVID-19, if they have been tested for COVID-19 and whether they have been identified as a close contact.

A **staff member** with symptoms who tests negative for COVID-19 can return to school when their symptoms resolve **except** if they have been identified as a close contact (see question 23).

Proof of a negative COVID-19 test result is not necessary for a student or staff member to return to school.

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

Anyone identified as a close contact can return to school after they have completed their required quarantine period unless they develop symptoms, receive a positive COVID-19 test result, or have an additional exposure to another person who tests positive for COVID-19. If any of these occur, the quarantine period will be adjusted.
24. If a student or staff member is required to stay home (isolate or quarantine), how will the school know when it is safe for them to return?

When a student or staff member is required to stay home, that person (or their parent/guardian) is responsible for following instructions from AHS Public Health and not going to school or any public place. It is up to that person to follow the isolation or quarantine requirements, and to communicate with the school about when it is safe for them to return.

**Siblings, family and household members**

25. If someone has COVID-19 symptoms, can their household members go to school?

Yes, household members without symptoms can continue to go to school, unless:
- The person with symptoms tests positive for COVID-19.
- The person with symptoms is also a close contact of someone who tested positive for COVID-19 (in which case, the household members should all quarantine until the person receives a negative COVID-19 test result).

26. If someone does not have symptoms but is identified as a close contact of someone who tests positive for COVID-19, do others in their household need to quarantine (e.g., siblings, other family members)?

No. Household members of close contacts do not need to quarantine as long as the close contact does not have symptoms.

**COVID-19 variants and school**

27. What is a COVID-19 “variant of concern”?  

Variants of concern are strains of COVID-19 that appear to spread more easily than others. Learn more about COVID-19 Variants.

28. If someone is sick with a COVID-19 variant of concern, does it change the response in schools?

No. The public health measures taken by the school remain the same.

29. If someone tests positive for a COVID-19 variant of concern, when can their household close contacts return to school?

People who live with someone who tests positive for a COVID-19 variant of concern can return to school when they have completed their required quarantine period, as advised by AHS Public Health, unless they develop symptoms, receive a positive COVID-19 rest result, or have an additional exposure to another person who tests positive for COVID-19. Details about quarantine requirements for household contacts are available here: COVID-19 Variants.
**Mask exceptions**

30. **UPDATED** Who can get an exception from wearing a mask? Is proof of an exception needed at school?

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

Family physicians can provide advice when a student or staff member has a medical condition that may require an exception from wearing a mask. 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.

Alberta Health and AHS do not need proof that someone is unable to wear a mask at school.

General masking advice is available from Alberta Health here: [alberta.ca/masks](http://alberta.ca/masks). Refer to the [Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH) Order on Mask Use in Schools](http://ahs.ca/covidschools) for more information.

School authorities and individual schools may have additional requirements for wearing masks.

**Schools, mental health and COVID-19**

31. What can families do to prepare if they are worried about the possibility of someone in their household testing positive for COVID-19?

Families can visit [A Practical Guide to Support Family Stress after a Positive COVID-19 Test](http://ahs.ca/psf) for tips on how to prepare for when someone has to isolate or quarantine.

32. Where can families find support if they are concerned about the mental health of their child(ren)?

The Mental Health Helpline is a 24 hour, seven day a week confidential service that provides support, information and referrals to people in Alberta experiencing mental health concerns. Call toll-free at 1-877-303-2642.

Refer to [ahs.ca/amh](http://ahs.ca/amh) for links to important phone numbers, mental health programs and services across the province. The page also includes information for parents and guardians of school-aged children.

[Help in Tough Times](http://ahs.ca/amh) has links to helpful information, resources and services for dealing with challenging situations, including resources for children and youth.
33. What supports are available for school staff members who are concerned about their own mental health?

The Mental Health Helpline is a 24 hour, seven day a week confidential service that provides support, information and referrals to people in Alberta experiencing mental health concerns. Call toll-free at 1-877-303-2642.

Refer to [ahs.ca/amh](https://ahs.ca/amh) for links to important phone numbers, mental health programs and services across the province.

[Help in Tough Times](https://ahs.ca/helpintoughtimes) has links to helpful information, resources and services for dealing with challenging situations, including resources for adults.

School staff can also ask their school or school authority about workplace wellness programs.

**COVID-19 vaccine**

34. Where can schools and families learn more about the COVID-19 vaccine?

Information about the COVID-19 vaccine can be found at [ahs.ca/covidvaccine](https://ahs.ca/covidvaccine) and [Frequently Asked Questions - COVID-19 Vaccine](https://ahs.ca/covidvaccine). Details on the phases of vaccine distribution are available at [COVID-19 vaccine program](https://ahs.ca/covidvaccine).