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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

School staff and any visitors are also required to complete a symptom checklist each day before coming to school.

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 student or school staff member develops symptoms that could be caused by either COVID-19 or by a known pre-existing condition (e.g., allergies), the individual should stay home and 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 individual's baseline health. As long as these symptoms do not change, the individual can continue to attend school. Repeat testing is not needed unless the nature of the symptom changes (e.g., a chronic cough worsens) or new symptoms develop.

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 case (in which case, the siblings or family members should all quarantine 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 and other school staff are considered on a case by case basis:

- Teachers who regularly interact within 2 metres with the students in their class would be considered as part of the cohort. If there was a case of COVID-19 in the classroom, the teacher would be considered a close contact and required to quarantine as they are part of the classroom cohort.
- If a teacher or school staff member can confirm that they were not within 2 metres of their students for more than 15 minutes cumulative during the COVID-19 case’s infectious period, they would not be considered part of the classroom cohort. This teacher or school staff member is not a close contact of the case and does not require quarantine.
- If the teacher or staff member tests positive and can confirm they were not within 2 metres of any of their students for more than 15 minutes cumulative during their infectious period, the students would not be considered close contacts.

How will close contacts be determined in a school setting?

AHS Public Health will work with schools to identify students/parents/guardians who have been in close contact with a case (e.g., grade-level cohorts or other class groups), and to
determine which school staff members are close contacts. AHS will request schools to provide a list of close contacts of a case, and then AHS will notify students (or their parents/guardians) and staff who are identified as 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 case.

**Staying home from school (isolation and quarantine)**

**When do students need to isolate or quarantine?**

Students who feel unwell should stay home from school. The AHS Parent COVID-19 Guide provides guidance about isolation based on specific symptoms of COVID-19.

Students identified as close contacts of a case must quarantine 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 quarantine for 14 days.

Students who have traveled outside of Canada are legally required to quarantine for 14 days, unless exempted by the Alberta COVID-19 Border Testing Pilot Program.

**When do staff need to isolate or quarantine?**

Staff members with symptoms of fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, sore throat or runny nose MUST legally isolate for at least 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 about actions staff must take based on their test results.

Staff members identified as close contacts of a case must quarantine 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 quarantine for 14 days.
Staff members who have traveled outside of Canada are legally required to quarantine for 14 days, unless exempted by the Alberta COVID-19 Border Testing Pilot Program.

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

When someone is exposed to a 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 case, do others in their household need to quarantine (e.g., siblings, other family members)?

No. Contacts of close contacts do not need to quarantine as long as the close contact does 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 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 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?

The staff member or student (or their parent/guardian) is informed of their test result whether it is positive or negative (often through automatic text or voice messaging or by a phone call), and provided with guidance by AHS. AHS Public Health also receives positive results directly from the lab.

The 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 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 by AHS if the case attended school while they were infectious or if the 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 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.

Decisions on the need for alternate instructional delivery plans or school closures will be made by Government in collaboration with the school.

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 student return to school following an illness or a negative COVID-19 test?

Students who feel unwell should stay home from school. The AHS Parent COVID-19 Guide provides guidance about when students can return to school based on specific symptoms of COVID-19.

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

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

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

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

Anyone who is feeling unwell should stay at home.

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

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

Close contacts of cases need to complete a 14 day quarantine 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 quarantine 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](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](https://open.alberta.ca/publications/covid-19-information-guidance-school-re-entry-scenario-1)


School authorities and individual schools may have additional requirements.