



## Conducting Contact Tracing in K-12 Schools

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When a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19 is identified in a student, teacher, or staff member in a school setting, the case investigator should gather information to help determine close contacts and exclusion recommendations. Additionally, the investigator will need to work with the school to conduct a thorough investigation and ensure the appropriate follow-up occurs. The following definitions are important to understand when conducting case investigation and contact tracing.

### Definitions

**Confirmed Case** – a polymerase chain reaction (PCR)-positive case with or without symptoms

**Probable Case** – an antigen-positive case or a symptomatic contact of a case

**Infectious Period** – a case of COVID-19 is considered infectious from two days prior to symptom onset, or specimen collection date for asymptomatic cases, through 10 days later

**Close Contact** – anyone who was within 6 feet of a confirmed or probable case for 15 minutes or more while they were considered infectious, regardless of whether either person wore a cloth face covering or face shield. Additionally, if they shared eating or drinking utensils or had direct physical contact with the person such as hugging or kissing.

**Isolation** – Applies to those who are symptomatic or test positive for COVID-19 and involves staying home from work, school, and/or activities. Isolation lasts for at least 10 days after the onset of symptoms, 24 hours fever-free without fever-reducing medication, and an improvement of symptoms. For cases who have not had symptoms, isolation lasts 10 days from the day of specimen collection for their first positive test. In rare instances (e.g., if a person was very sick or has certain serious underlying medical problems), isolation may last 20 days. Repeat testing is not recommended to decide when to end the period of isolation. Instead, determining when to end isolation should be based on the symptom-based criteria above.

**Quarantine** – Applies to those who are potentially exposed and involves staying home from work, school, and/or activities when a person is a close contact to someone with COVID-19. Quarantine lasts for 14 days from the date of last exposure to the case (unless a person becomes a case themselves, in which case they must follow release from isolation guidance instead). Negative testing does not release a person from quarantine.

**Case Investigation** – Investigations should be completed on all confirmed and probable cases. Investigators are to collect information regarding the cases' symptoms and any sensitive occupations (e.g., health care workers) and elicit contacts including household, school, work and other activities.

**Contact Tracing** – Contacts are elicited during the investigation of confirmed and probable cases. Contacts are then informed of their possible exposure to a case and the need to quarantine for 14 days. They are educated on the virus and asked to monitor for symptoms.

## **Case Interview**

The interview with confirmed or probable COVID-19 cases in K–12 school settings should address the following information requirements and should be input into Merlin within 24 hours:

- Date of symptom onset
- For asymptomatic cases, date of specimen collection for first positive test
- Reason the case was tested (e.g., symptoms, contact to case, part of outbreak or cluster)
- Date(s) the person last worked/attended school during their infectious period
- Mode of transportation to and from the school (e.g., bus, carpool, etc.)
- Before and after school activities (e.g., clubs, sports, etc.)

## **School Evaluation**

The evaluation of the school for confirmed or probable COVID-19 cases in the K–12 school setting should address the following information requirements:

- When was the person on campus during their infectious period?
- With whom did that person come in close contact?
- Was that person with a single cohort in one classroom throughout the school day?
- Was that person mixing with other people or classrooms?
- Was there intermixing between groups or classrooms?
- How were the classrooms set up (desk separation and spacing)?

The information gathered during the case interview and school evaluation will dictate the recommendations that need to be followed. Close contacts to the case should be notified by phone and possibly by letter regarding their potential exposure and advised of required follow-up actions. They should stay home and quarantine for 14 days from their last exposure to the case. Of note, current CDC guidance indicates that, if someone was diagnosed with COVID-19 within the previous 3 months of the exposure, they do not need to quarantine.

Depending upon the case's movements and actions, the number of people considered close contacts will vary. For example, if the case was deemed to have spent limited time at the school while infectious, or strict cohorting and social distancing within the classroom is observed, very few students or teachers would need to be quarantined. If strict cohorting is done, but there is prolonged contact and some close interaction in the classroom, then the teacher and all students in the classroom will likely be quarantined, and the classroom cleaned and disinfected. If the case was interacting with students and teachers throughout the school campus while infectious, then a larger number of students and school personnel may need to be quarantined. More broad interventions may also be needed if investigations reveal untraceable transmission in the school setting.

## **Testing Recommendations**

Asymptomatic staff and students who are close contacts to someone with COVID-19 do not require testing. If asymptomatic contacts choose to get tested prior to the end of their quarantine, they will still be required to complete the 14 days regardless of a negative test result. They may return to school after at least 14 days have passed from the date of last exposure to the case, if they remain symptom free.

K–12 schools and some staff may be designated as [critical infrastructure](#) under the [government facilities sector](#). While it is ideal that exposed staff self-quarantine for the 14-day period, there may be some circumstances when exposed asymptomatic staff may return to work in fewer than the 14 days if their duties cannot be filled by another individual. It is important that all staff returning under this scenario perform daily symptoms checks, wear masks, stay more than 6 feet from students and teachers and do not come to work if symptoms develop.

Staff and students who are close contacts to someone with COVID-19 and do develop symptoms within the 14 days should seek medical care and testing. If a symptomatic contact tests PCR-negative for COVID-19, the contact may return to school and activities after the 14-day quarantine period is completed and symptoms have resolved. If the contact tests positive for COVID-19, then the individual is now considered a case and should follow the release from isolation guidance for cases of COVID-19.

When selecting a testing laboratory, make sure results can be provided within 24 to 48 hours. As stated above, repeat testing is not recommended to decide when to end the period of isolation for COVID-19 cases. Repeat testing is not recommended within the first 3 months of the date of the original positive laboratory result, as this is unlikely to provide additional information useful for decision making.

Options for COVID-19 testing for staff/students who have been excluded from school:

- Staff/students obtain testing through their private medical provider
- Staff/students obtain testing at a [public testing site](#) in their community
- County health departments facilitate testing, particularly when school outbreaks occur or if testing is needed to support decision making county health departments should consider consulting with the Bureau of Public Laboratories regarding testing at one of the state public health laboratories.

## **Cleaning and Disinfection**

When a COVID-19 case has been in the school while infectious, the CDC recommends cleaning and disinfecting the building thoroughly by:

- Closing off areas used by the persons with COVID-19 and waiting as long as practical (if possible, up to 24 hours) before beginning cleaning and disinfection to minimize potential for exposure to respiratory droplets
  - If possible, open outside doors and windows to increase air circulation in the area
- Cleaning and disinfecting all areas (e.g., offices, bathrooms, and common areas) used by the person(s) with COVID-19, focusing especially on frequently touched surfaces (e.g., door handles)
  - Surfaces should be cleaned using soap (or a detergent) and water prior to disinfection
  - For disinfection, most common EPA-registered household disinfectants should be effective against the virus that causes COVID-19

## **References and Resources**

[CDC School Recommendations](#)

[CDC Cleaning, Disinfection and Hand Hygiene in Schools](#)

[COVID-19 Case Definition](#)

[Contact Tracing Guidance](#)

[Outbreak Guidance](#)