



COVID-19 in Schools: Frequently Asked Questions

These FAQs are meant to explain the COVID-19 impact to students and schools.

AT HOME

When should sick children stay home from school?

Students or staff must stay home from school when they have new or worsening cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, or new loss of taste or smell, with or without fever, or if they test positive for COVID-19 even if they do not have symptoms. Children with a positive COVID-19 test or monitoring symptoms at home should stay home until they have had no fever for 24 hours without use of fever-reducing medication AND have had improvement of symptoms AND at least 10 days have passed since symptoms first appeared. If the child tested positive but never developed symptoms, they must stay home until 10 days have passed since they were tested. Siblings, household members and close contacts should also stay home for the recommended length of quarantine; see the question and answer below on the length of quarantine. If your child feels too sick to go to school or childcare, please keep him or her home. The [DHEC School and Childcare Exclusion List](#) has been updated to include COVID-19.

Are nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea symptoms of COVID?

These can be symptoms of COVID-19 but are not always present in people positive for COVID-19. These symptoms may be related to another condition. Per the Exclusion list, students experiencing vomiting or diarrhea should not attend school.

AT SCHOOL

What is the difference between quarantine and isolation?

Isolation and quarantine are measures taken to physically separate people to reduce the risk of spreading the virus. More information is available on DHEC's [COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions](#) webpage. Essentially:

- Isolation separates those believed to be able to spread COVID-19 to others – those who have tested positive or have symptoms of COVID-19.
- Quarantine separates those who are believed to have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 because they are at risk of becoming ill and spreading the virus before symptoms develop.

Close Contacts

What is a close contact?

Someone who was within 6 feet of an infected person (laboratory-confirmed or a clinically compatible illness) for a cumulative total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period (for example, three individual 5-minute exposures for a total of 15 minutes) from 48 hours prior to symptom onset (or specimen collection for an asymptomatic infected person) of the infected person.

The close contact definition excludes students who were within 3 to 6 feet of an infected student (laboratory-confirmed or a clinically compatible illness) if the exposed student(s) wore mask(s) during the exposure time. This exception does not apply to teachers, staff, or other adults in the indoor classroom setting. More information can be found in the [SC DHEC COVID-19 Guidance for K-12 Schools](#).

Is testing recommended for close contacts?

Yes, testing is recommended for people who have been in close contact with an infected person. For more information, please visit CDC's [contact website](#). DHEC encourages parents to allow students to participate in school testing programs if available.

Will the sibling of a close contact be able to attend school?

Yes, as long as the close contact does not develop symptoms or test positive.

If a non-household close contact to a case tests negative for COVID-19 during their quarantine, does their quarantine end then, thus allowing them to return to school?

The standard quarantine period after close contact with someone contagious with COVID-19 is fourteen (14) days. CDC has provided two (2) [options to shorten](#) that time period that schools may choose to apply as long as all conditions listed are met. The schools will determine which quarantine options to apply to allow for return.

What is the guidance for a student living in a house with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 and is in isolation? Do household members, including the student need to quarantine?

Students who live in a house with someone positive for COVID-19 and are unable to separate from the infected person in the household, the student will need to quarantine for the entire isolation period of the family member (at least 10 days) plus an additional 14 days to assure they do not develop symptoms unless shortened quarantine options are available at the school. Those who can separate themselves from the infected person will need to quarantine for 14 days since last exposure to the infected person. Quarantine may not be necessary if the exposed person is vaccinated or previously infected within the previous 90 days.

Can close contacts be grouped in the same classroom instead of excluding them?

This is not recommended at this time.

If a teacher or classmate has close contact for short periods of time with a student positive for COVID-19 throughout the day, would we consider him/her a close contact if the close contact adds up to 15 minutes or more?

Yes. If a teacher or classmate is spending periods of time in close contact with a student that add up to greater than 15 minutes throughout the day they would be considered a close contact.

If the school can assure 6 feet of physical distancing in a classroom, do the students still need to wear a mask in class to avoid being considered a close contact?

Close contacts are generally defined as anyone who is within 6 feet of a positive case for greater than 15 minutes during the time a person can spread the disease to others. Wearing a mask is recommended, especially when physical distancing cannot be assured at all times. The [DHEC School Guidance](#) provides the most up-to-date information regarding close contact definitions.

What is the isolation guidance for someone who is showing signs of COVID-19 and waiting for test results?

Someone showing signs of COVID-19 who is awaiting test results should remain in isolation until the test results are known. Isolation typically lasts 10 days from onset of symptoms. While awaiting test results, someone who is symptomatic should remain separate from others until the test results are known. Please notify your child's school of any positive COVID-19 test result.

Why does the new close contact exclusion definition only apply to students? The close contact definition in schools was determined based on differences in transmission dynamics between adults and children. The exception to the close contact definition was specifically developed to facilitate the ability to use 3 feet of distance between students in the indoor classroom setting.

Physical Distancing

If a chorus class can provide for greater than 6 feet of physical distancing while singing, but not wearing a mask, would that get rid of the considerations of close contacts in the class?

Chorus classes are of concern as singing might increase the distance respiratory droplets travel. It is highly recommended that chorus students spread *at least* 6 feet apart AND wear a mask when not singing, unless the class is outdoors and the distance can be maintained. It is preferable to hold practice outdoors when possible.

Is it OK for students to throw a football, kick a soccer ball, etc. in PE class if they maintain at least a 6-foot distance?

Yes. Students can participate in physical activities if they are keeping a 6-foot distance. Wearing a mask is recommended, especially when physical distancing cannot be assured at all times. PE activities that can be done outdoors are preferred.

Case Investigations

What will the case investigation process look like?

When notified of a positive case from a community testing site or provider, DHEC staff will interview the person (or the parent/guardian if the case is a child) to determine the contagious period, potential close contacts, and to provide education about isolation. If there is an association with a school, DHEC will reach out to the school to request that the school perform contact tracing to determine any school related close contacts and provide guidance to prevent spread. External close contacts will be contacted by DHEC. If testing is performed by the school nurse, or athletic trainer, the nurse or trainer will report positive cases to DHEC for case investigation and the school will perform contact tracing for any school related close contacts.

If a student or faculty member is tested, how long will it take to get results?

It depends upon which testing site the person attends. Testing sites are sponsored by a variety of partners and the time it takes to get results depends upon the laboratory used to process the samples and report the results. People should receive their results directly from the medical partner conducting the testing.

If a teacher tests positive for COVID-19 but show no signs, can he/she still work?

No, they cannot work. They should isolate as instructed.

If a teacher/staff is a close contact or household contact to a case but has no symptoms, can he/she continue to work?

No, unless they are vaccinated or previously infected with COVID-19 during the past 90 days. Also, if a teacher/staff returns they must wear a mask until 14 days after the last exposure to the case.

How will the schools be notified if there is a positive case in the school?

Notification may happen by different ways. The student's parent/guardian or the staff member should notify the school of their positive result. DHEC staff will call the principal or his/her designee to notify the school of a positive case that DHEC becomes aware of during case investigation. DHEC will only identify the person to the essential person(s) at the school, and the school must maintain the case's confidentiality.

Will the school be responsible for contact tracing?

The school is responsible for performing contact tracing at the school level. During a DHEC case investigation, the nurse, principal or teacher may be asked to help assess and confirm close contacts.

Who is responsible for sending notification letters to parents, the schools or DHEC?

Schools are responsible for the notification process, though they may choose to use standard notification letters provided to them by DHEC.

Should the school be notifying the entire school/grade/classroom when there is a positive case in a class. And is the notification dependent on whether or not the class can safely social distance and/or mask? Schools are responsible for the notification process to close contacts but may choose to notify others for awareness only.

Can the school request proof of a positive exposure? Yes. This would be a school/district decision.

Exclusion

What document provides guidance about conditions that could lead to someone being removed from school due to illness?

That information is found in the [School Exclusion List](#) posted on the DHEC website. There is also a [brochure](#) for parents.

If someone has symptoms but they are unable to be tested or their physician will not perform the test, are they excluded?

The person can return if their physician thinks there is another likely diagnosis (e.g. they test positive for Strep), or if they receive a negative COVID test result, or if they complete the isolation period (it has been at least 10 days since their symptoms began, AND they have been free of their fever for 24 hours without the aid of fever-reducing medication, AND other symptoms are improved). Anyone interested in free, community testing can visit the DHEC [testing page](#) .

Can school nurses conduct testing?

Yes. If they participate in the Schools COVID Testing Program with DHEC or other partner. These programs are optional.

If an employee has been in a group setting and is now showing COVID-19 symptoms and has test results pending, how do you handle others in the group? Are others OK to continue working?

If the others in the group have no symptoms, they can continue working with heightened awareness and monitoring for signs/symptoms.

Cleaning & Disinfection**Does playground equipment need to be cleaned while in use (i.e. every time a different child uses a slide, swing, etc.)?**

Current studies indicate that the risk of catching COVID through touching objects is low. While increased cleaning measures are not harmful, normal and standard cleaning processes will suffice.

Other than standard disinfection practices, are there other recommendations regarding shared musical instruments?

Musicians should be spaced as far apart as possible, ideally farther than 6 feet apart, and separating practice groups should be considered. Students also should not share mouth pieces and instruments should be cleaned and disinfected between uses if shared among students.

Are there special considerations or recommendations regarding the use and disinfection of restrooms in or attached to the classrooms? Does the teacher need to clean it every time it is used? Does the student need to wear a mask while in the restroom?

Staff should assure the bathrooms are cleaned and disinfected routinely using disinfectants that are EPA-approved against SARS-CoV-2 virus, while paying special attention to high touch areas. Masks should be worn in the bathroom, including single use restrooms.

Testing**What happens if my child tests positive for one test and negative with another test?**

Repeat testing is not recommended unless the individual is asymptomatic, not a close contact, and was tested with an antigen test during routine screening. For those individuals with symptoms or those identified as a close contact, the positive test is accepted, and isolation must begin on the test date or start of symptoms. If there are concerns about differing results, it is best to consult with a healthcare provider for guidance on each individual situation. It is at the discretion of the school to determine applicable return date for students.

A student was Covid-19 positive less than 3 months ago and is newly symptomatic. Do they need to quarantine? The student should be excluded from school based on symptoms. It is recommended for the student to visit a healthcare provider for evaluation to determine the cause of the illness.

An asymptomatic fully vaccinated teacher tested positive with a PCR test, and then negative on a PCR test two days later. Can she return to school? The teacher should be excluded from school based on the positive test result. If there are differing results, it is best to consult with a healthcare provider for guidance. It is at the discretion of the school to determine applicable return date for teachers/staff.

Can results from an at-home testing device be used in school settings? It is at the discretion of the school as to whether they will allow for use of at-home self-tests. At-home self-test are not reportable to DHEC and may not be used to verify infection to prevent future quarantine in the next 90 days if exposed.

My child tested positive for antibodies which indicate they had Covid 19 disease, why do they need to quarantine?

Antibodies are only one type of immune protection which our bodies make when exposed to a disease. At this time, antibody testing does not correlate to the level of protection or the longevity of protection so people with a presence of antibodies must still quarantine.

Miscellaneous

What is the data threshold for closing a school or classroom?

There is no defined standard or threshold for closing schools or classrooms but DHEC has provided some thresholds to consider, and these can be found in the [DHEC School Guidance Booklet](#). Many factors would need to be considered, including for example, not just the number of cases but also the distribution of cases within a school and their timing, vaccination rates, etc. DHEC does not make closure decisions but works closely with school officials to help them make the best decisions for the students and teachers.

Is there a recommended number of “hygiene breaks” (i.e. time to wash hands) for children?

It is recommended that children (and adults) wash their hands routinely and thoroughly throughout the day, particularly before eating, after using the restroom and when hands are soiled or dirtied. There is no specific recommendation on how often hands should be washed.

At what temperature reading would a school send a student or staff member home?

If a student or staff member has a temperature of 100.4°F or greater, they should be sent home, regardless of whether or not they have any other symptoms. Children or staff with temperatures between 100.1°F and 100.3°F should be excluded under the influenza-like illness (ILI) criteria if they also have cough and/or sore throat with no other known cause. Refer to the [School Exclusion List](#) for more information.

Does DHEC recommend routine temperature screenings in the schools?

While this practice is not harmful, it is not a specific recommendation. However, it is recommended that parents monitor their children at home for symptoms.

**Does DHEC recommend taking students' temperatures prior to them getting on the bus?
Should a student with a known elevated temperature be allowed on the bus?**

Temperature screening is not recommended prior to boarding the bus. However, if temperature screening is conducted, children with known, confirmed fevers (100.4°F or greater) should not be allowed on the bus. Parents who drive their children to school should keep their child at home if they have known, confirmed fevers greater than 100.4°F.

Are there any recommendations for teachers regarding how to best console a crying child and maintain safe practices?

In these situations, it is best if the teacher and child are both wearing a mask and the teacher is wearing eye protection such as a face shield. The duration of the close contact should be limited as much as possible. The definition of close contact considers both distance and duration, so it is important to limit the duration of direct and unprotected exposure.

Is it advisable for the districts to have a central point of communication (i.e. a website) for communicating with parents?

This would need to be approved through the school district and SC Department of Education. DHEC has its own communication plan regarding school COVID-19 data.

This is consistent with guidance available as of October 29, 2021 and may be updated as new information on this novel virus and evolving situation become available.