



COVID-19

Frequently Asked Questions for Parents and Caregivers about COVID-19 Precautions in Schools

Updated Feb. 16, 2022

COVID-19 Safety and My School

Why does CDC guidance for schools keep changing?

CDC guidance for K–12 schools changes because what we know about COVID-19 continues to change. This means guidance is updated as CDC learns more about what works best to reduce the risk of getting or spreading COVID-19.

How can I help my child stay safe in school?

It is essential to teach your children healthy behaviors and reinforce them. Talk to them about the importance of wearing a [well-fitting mask](#), [physical distancing](#), frequent [handwashing](#), and staying home when sick so that they can make choices that help keep them safe at school.


What questions can I ask the school to learn about their COVID-19 safety strategies?

Here are some questions you can ask your child's school to learn more about their COVID-19 safety strategies.


- What [prevention strategies](#) are you currently using to keep my child safe in school?
- How and when are you updating your protocols for COVID-19?
- How are parents and caregivers updated on any changes in the school's prevention strategies?
- Will you be hosting information sessions about [COVID-19 vaccines](#) for parents, guardians, and eligible [students](#)?
- Will you offer COVID-19 vaccination at the school?
- Are you requiring educators, staff, or students to be vaccinated against COVID-19?
- Will you be providing screening testing regularly?
- What happens if my child's teacher gets sick from COVID-19?
- Are there procedures in place for [contact tracing](#)? What is your quarantine policy if my child comes into close contact with someone who has COVID-19?
- Are you allowing parents and other visitors on campus? And if so, what procedures are you using for visitors?
- How will parents be notified if there is a case of COVID-19 at the school or if their child is a close contact?
- Are you using outdoor spaces for learning, extracurricular activities, or mealtime?
- What are you doing to keep students safe when they are eating meals?

- What are my virtual learning options if my child has to [quarantine or isolate](#)?


Vaccines

Why is it important for me and my child to get vaccinated for COVID-19? 

- COVID-19 vaccines reduce the risk of people getting COVID-19 and can also reduce the risk of spreading it. The risk of severe illness is much greater for people who are not vaccinated against COVID-19.
- COVID-19 [vaccines are safe and effective](#) at preventing severe illness and death from COVID-19.
- CDC recommends everyone ages 5 years and older get their [primary series](#) of COVID-19 vaccines, and receive a booster dose when eligible, so they can stay up to date on vaccines.
- People who are [up to date](#) on COVID-19 vaccines will not be required to quarantine if they come into close contact with someone who has COVID-19.
- Learn more about [COVID-19 vaccines and children and teens](#).

Can the school ask me or my child about my child's COVID-19 vaccination status? 

- It depends—vaccination requirements for students are determined by [state laws](#), not CDC. State laws also establish the enforcement of school vaccination requirements and exemptions. Schools that plan to ask about COVID-19 vaccination status should use standard protocols to collect and secure this and other immunization or health status information from students. Data collection and notification of status should align with relevant regulations of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) regulations, and applicable federal, state, and local privacy laws. Check with your state to learn more about school vaccination requirements.

Can schools be open for in-person learning if not all educators are up to date on COVID-19 vaccines? 

- Yes, but this increases risk of transmission within the school. The most important and effective strategy to help schools decrease risk of transmission and avoid outbreaks is having high levels of vaccination among students, educators, staff, and family members. Using layered [prevention strategies](#) also remains critical to protecting everyone, including students, educators, and staff. Prevention strategies include [masking](#), [physical distancing](#), [handwashing](#), [ventilation](#), and [staying home when sick](#).

Masks

Do masks work? 

- Yes, masks work. They limit the spread of COVID-19, from one person to another by blocking it from entering the air. They also help protect the person wearing the mask because the mask can help prevent that person from breathing in the virus.
- Masks work best when everyone wears a well-fitting mask [consistently and correctly](#).
- For more information about types of masks, visit [Types of Masks and Respirators](#).

Why are masks important at school?

- When students, educators, and staff wear [well-fitting masks](#) consistently and correctly, they can help limit the spread of COVID-19 from one person to another. This is especially important indoors. [CDC recommends](#) all schools require that everyone ages 2 years and older wear a well-fitting mask indoors consistently and correctly.

Should my child wear a mask to school if the school has made it optional?

- Yes, masking indoors is one of the best ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19. CDC recommends all schools require that everyone ages 2 years and older wear a [well-fitting mask](#) indoors consistently and correctly. If mask use is optional, students can still wear masks to protect themselves.

Does wearing a mask for a long time pose any risks to my child?

- No, wearing a [well-fitting mask](#) consistently and correctly does not pose a health risk to your child. [Studies](#) have shown that masks are safe and effective and that wearing a mask does not increase risk from germs or increase carbon dioxide levels for children. It is important to [store your child's mask properly](#) and if it is a cloth mask, wash it regularly to keep it clean. Consider having your child bring more than one mask to school to easily replace a dirty or wet mask with a clean one.

Does my child need to wear their mask on the school bus?


- Yes, CDC issued an order on January 29, 2021, requiring masks on public transportation. [CDC's Order](#) applies to all public transportation, including school buses. Students and drivers must wear a mask on school buses, including on buses operated by public and private school systems, subject to the exclusions and exemptions in CDC's Order. Learn more about the [requirement for face masks on public transportation](#).

What should I ask my school if they are saying masks are optional?

- Ask your child's school:
 - How are you prepared to respond to an outbreak? What strategies do you have in place to implement [contact tracing](#) to help reduce the spread of COVID-19?
 - What [prevention strategies](#) are you using to reduce risk of spreading COVID-19?


- What are you doing to maintain [physical distance](#) between students, educators, and staff in the classroom? In situations when unmasking is essential, such as lunch time, there should be at least 6 feet of distance between all students, educators, and staff.
- What are you doing to improve [ventilation](#) throughout the building? This should include bringing outdoor air into the building, enhancing ventilation systems, and using HEPA filters.
- Are you using outdoor spaces for learning and mealtime? An outdoor space may allow for more distancing. Generally, masks don't need to be worn outside as long as students are not in crowded settings.

Testing and Contact Tracing

My school keeps talking about diagnostic tests and screening tests for COVID-19– what's the difference? 

- [Diagnostic testing](#) is intended to identify current infection in individuals and should be performed on anyone who has [symptoms](#) consistent with COVID-19 or who has been identified as a close contact.
- [Screening testing](#) is intended to identify people with COVID-19 who do not have symptoms of COVID-19, and who do not have known, suspected, or reported exposure to COVID-19. Screening helps to identify unknown cases so that measures can be taken to prevent further transmission.
- Learn more about [COVID-19 testing](#).

How does my child benefit from school-based testing for COVID-19? 

- Testing is an important layer of prevention that can quickly identify people who have COVID-19 and potentially prevent an outbreak within the school. It is used to identify people with infection, including those with or without symptoms. By identifying infections early, schools can limit COVID-19 transmission and keep students in school for in-person learning, sports, and extracurricular activities.
- School-based testing can make it quick and easy to get your child tested, whether as part of routine screening testing, when they have symptoms, or have been exposed to someone with COVID-19. Some schools offer diagnostic testing and some offer both diagnostic and screening testing. Funds are available from the federal government [to support testing in schools](#).
- Find COVID-19 [testing locations](#)  in your community.

Why does my school test for COVID-19 so often? 

- Regular testing is a tool to stop COVID-19 from spreading at school. Schools can decide how many students will be tested and how often based on what's happening in the community.

How can I explain the COVID-19 test to my child? 

- The COVID-19 test can be given in different ways. Most tests use a simple nasal swab, which goes inside the lower nostril, and others use saliva taken from the mouth. You can ask your child's school what method is used for their

testing program so you can tell your child what to expect for their test.

How long will it take to get my child's COVID-19 test results?

- It depends on the test that the school uses. Some types of viral test results can be available on site in as little as 15 minutes, but other viral tests may need to be performed in a laboratory and could take 24–48 hours or more to be returned.

What should I do if my child tests positive for COVID-19?

- Contact your child's healthcare provider and keep your child home from school. Your child should **not** go to school, socialize, or participate in any in-person extracurricular activities, and you should follow your child's school's instructions for isolation.
- If a test was done outside of school, notify the school about the positive result so that they can conduct contact tracing.
- You may also want to ask about the [quarantine](#) and [isolation](#) policy at your child's school and whether other children in your home should stay home from school.
- Ask your child's school about virtual learning options and about their current policies for when your child can return to school.
- If your child is young and needs care, you might designate one person to be the primary caregiver for your child. Ask the designated [caregiver](#) to also stay away from the other individuals in the home, when possible, to prevent further spread of COVID-19 in the household.

If I test positive for COVID-19, can my child still go to school?

- If you or [anyone in your household tests positive](#), your child may be considered a [close contact](#) and should follow [public health recommendations](#) for follow-up based on their vaccination status or history of prior infection. If your child needs to quarantine, ask your child's school about virtual learning options during this time and for instructions on when your child can return to school.

What is contact tracing?

- [Contact tracing](#) is a prevention strategy that health departments and schools use to provide instructions and support to people who have COVID-19 and their [close contacts](#).
- Contact tracing can help slow the spread of COVID-19 among students, staff, educators, contractors, and volunteers and can help to prevent school closures due to large-scale [outbreaks](#).
- Contact tracing is most effective when there is a high level of participation by people who have COVID-19 and those identified to be their close contacts.

If my child tests positive for COVID-19, what information will I be asked to provide for contact tracing?

- If your child tests positive for COVID-19, it is very important to identify anyone that they may have come into [close contact](#) with during the 2 days prior to the start of their symptoms (at or outside of school), or the date of their positive test if they do not have symptoms.
- You will be asked about your child's medical history, symptoms, and activities related to COVID-19 transmission. You may be asked to help identify people that your child was around who might be determined to be a close contact.
- Close contacts will need to follow public health recommendations including wearing a mask, getting tested, and [quarantining](#) based on their vaccination status and history of COVID-19. The information you provide during contact tracing activities will be kept confidential in accordance with applicable federal, state, and local privacy laws and regulations.

Quarantine, Isolation, and Close Contacts

What is the difference between quarantine and isolation? 

- You quarantine when you have been exposed to COVID-19 and are not up to date on your vaccines. This is because you might become infected with COVID-19 and could spread COVID-19 to others, even if you do not have symptoms.
- [Isolation](#) is used to separate people who have COVID-19 from those who do not have COVID-19. You **isolate** when you show symptoms of COVID-19 or are infected with the virus that causes COVID-19, even if you don't have symptoms.

Learn more about [COVID-19 quarantine for K-12 schools](#).

Should my child stay home if they have COVID-19 symptoms? 


- Yes, your child should stay home if they have [symptoms](#) of COVID-19. Your child should also get [tested](#) for COVID-19. It is very important that your child not attend in-person school when he or she has symptoms so that they don't spread illness to teachers, staff, or other students. Ask your child's school about virtual learning options during [isolation](#). Your child should isolate at home and avoid going in public places, playing sports, participating in extracurricular activities, or socializing in-person with people who do not live in your household. This is also true if your child is showing any symptoms of other respiratory illnesses, such as the flu.
- Check with your child's school to learn more about their sick policies and when students can return to school.
- Learn more about how schools can [respond to COVID-19 cases](#).

What should I do if my child has symptoms at school? 


- Pick up your child as soon as possible so that they can isolate and arrange for a COVID-19 test. It is very important that your child not attend in-person school when they have symptoms of COVID-19 so that they don't spread illness to teachers, staff, or other students.

What does it mean if my child is identified by the school as a "close contact?" 


- This means your child was exposed to someone with COVID-19 and needs to follow testing, masking, and [quarantine](#) guidance from your child’s school based on their vaccination status and history of prior infection from COVID-19.

My child was identified as a close contact and is NOT up to date on their COVID-19 vaccines—what should I do? 

- CDC recommends that close contacts who are not [up to date](#) on their COVID-19 vaccines [quarantine](#) for at least 5 days, get tested for COVID-19 at least five days after their last close contact, and wear a well-fitting mask around others for 10 days after their last close contact. You should consult with your child’s school and follow attendance protocols for close contacts who are unvaccinated or not up to date on their vaccines.
- If your child develops symptoms at any point during quarantine, they need to get [tested](#) and [isolate](#) immediately. Be sure to notify your child’s school if this happens and reach out to your healthcare provider.

My child was identified as a close contact and is up to date on their COVID-19 vaccines or has tested positive for COVID-19 within the past 90 days—what should I do? 

- People who are [up to date](#) on their COVID-19 vaccines should get tested at least 5 days after coming into close contact with someone with COVID-19 and wear a mask indoors in public for 10 days after their last close contact. If [symptoms](#) develop, they should [isolate](#) and get tested immediately.
- People who have [had COVID-19 within the past 90 days and recovered](#) should wear a mask indoors in public for 10 days after exposure, monitor for symptoms, and get tested for COVID-19 if they develop symptoms.

My school is allowing students who were identified as close contacts to come into school if they are tested regularly for COVID-19—is this safe? 

- [Test to Stay](#) combines [contact tracing](#) and frequent [testing](#) to allow [close contacts](#) who would otherwise need to [quarantine](#), do not test positive for COVID-19, and do not have symptoms of COVID-19 to continue in-person learning.
- [Studies](#) have shown that transmission in the school setting can remain low when Test to Stay was implemented in combination with layered prevention measures, such as wearing a mask.
- Schools considering Test to Stay should have a strong contact tracing program and access to testing resources (for example, testing supplies and personnel), since these are important for effectively implementing Test to Stay. Testing frequency can vary, but more frequent testing is better to quickly identify students who are infected with COVID-19 and need to isolate.
- Schools may consider Test to Stay as an option for keeping close contacts in the classroom as an alternative to traditional quarantine at home. You can ask your school whether they offer Test to Stay.

Sports and Activities

Can my child safely participate in extracurricular activities and sports?

- It depends—extracurricular activities that involve heavier breathing have higher risk of transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19 without masks, without ventilation, and without physical distancing. Masks should be worn during indoor sports and other activities that meet indoors, such as band, choir, theater, and school clubs. Masks should not be worn while swimming since a wet mask can make it difficult to breathe and may not work as intended.
- Your child should get vaccinated as soon as eligible and should not participate in sports or activities if they are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms.
- CDC recommends that schools cancel sports and extracurricular activities or make them fully virtual if your child's school is an area of high [community transmission](#).
- It is safest to participate in these types of extracurricular activities and sports when everyone is [up to date on their COVID-19 vaccines](#). Schools can implement a testing (sometimes called “test to play”) or vaccination requirement for participating to keep your child safe.
- Physical distancing should be used at sporting events (such as fields, benches/team areas, locker rooms, spectator viewing areas, spectator facilities/restrooms) along with signage about wearing masks for all guests to see.

Can my child participate in recess and physical education?

- Yes, these active times during the school day help children learn and achieve as well as support their social, emotional, and mental health. Being outside is better than indoors, but when physical education and recess are held indoors, it is important to have good ventilation and for everyone to wear masks and maximize distance as much as possible. Ask your child's school about their ventilation, mask, and distancing policies during recess and physical education to stay informed about the risk to your child.
- In general, students, educators, and staff do not need to [wear masks](#) when participating in recess and physical education outdoors.


Is it ok for my child to use the playground?

- Yes, more is known about how long the virus stays on surfaces compared with last year. Kids can safely use playground equipment with just daily [cleaning](#). Students, educators, and staff members should [wash their hands](#) before and after use of any playground equipment. Cleaning and disinfection between every use of playground and physical education equipment are not needed.

Can my child share items such as art supplies and sports equipment with other students?


- Yes, but your child should [wash their hands](#) or use hand sanitizer before, during, and after use of any shared materials. Cleaning and disinfection between every use of art supplies, sports equipment, or music sheets is not needed.
- Keeping hands clean and regularly [cleaning surfaces](#) help prevent a variety of diseases and infections. Handwashing stations are recommended for students, educators, and staff to access whenever they may need to remove their mask, while sharing objects, after coughing or sneezing, before and after eating, and after using the restroom.

Mealtime

Are there ways to keep my child safe during mealtime? 

- Yes, ask your child’s school about their [mealtime protocols](#). Schools should require masks and distancing in food service lines, keep students at least 6 feet apart while eating, have students put their masks back on after eating, and do everything possible to improve ventilation, which includes using outdoor space. If students are not spaced 6 feet apart with proper ventilation, this is a high-risk situation because masks are removed while eating.
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Ventilation


My child says the school is opening windows during the day—does that reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading? 

- That is one of many ways to [improve ventilation](#). Opening windows brings fresh air into the classroom and can reduce the amount of virus in the air as long it does not become a safety or health risk to the students.
 - Bus drivers can open or crack windows a few inches to improve air circulation.
 - There are several other ways schools can improve ventilation.
 - Moving classes outside when weather permits.
 - Opening multiple doors.
 - Using child-safe fans.
 - Making changes to the heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) or air filtration systems.
 - Keeping the ventilation system running all day—especially whenever students are gathering.
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Special Accommodations

My child is immunocompromised—what can the school do to help keep my child safe? 


- Schools can layer [prevention strategies](#), such as requiring masks, promoting vaccination, improving ventilation, and physical distancing. If the school is not using layered prevention strategies and you have concerns about sending your child to school under those circumstances, ask about virtual learning options available to protect your child who is at increased risk for COVID-19.
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What if someone else in our household is at high risk for COVID-19—is it safe for my child to go to school? 


- It depends—it is most advisable for schools to use masking with other layered prevention strategies. You can also use layered prevention strategies at home. One way to help protect everyone is to make sure that all adults and

eligible youth in a household are [up to date](#) on their COVID-19 vaccines. Learn more about what you can do to [protect your family members](#) from COVID-19.

If my child has special needs, is there anything else the school can do for us?

- Yes, administrators are required to work with your child and your family to understand your child's needs, provide access to required services, and [adjust strategies](#)  as needed.
- Physical distancing and wearing masks may be difficult for some people with certain disabilities, who may be [exempted](#) from some of these requirements.
- When educators and staff wear a mask, some children may have challenges with communication and learning. In such situations, educators and staff might be able to wear a clear or cloth mask with a clear panel when interacting with younger children, children learning to read, or people who rely on reading lips.

Can CDC require that my school give my child an option for virtual learning?

- No, CDC does not have regulatory authority over schools. [CDC's Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in Schools](#) does recommend that schools provide accommodations, modifications, and assistance for students, educators, and staff members with disabilities and other health care needs. It is always appropriate for you, as a parent or caregiver, to speak with your child's school administration about any specific health concerns you may have about your child.
- For [students with disabilities](#) , the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team at your school must develop the education program and then determine the student's educational placement. The IEP Team must also consider whether the student needs assistive technology devices and services.

My child is in Pre-K. Does CDC's school guidance still apply?

- CDC has specific guidance for [Operating Early Care and Education/Child Care Programs](#). However, pre-K programs in K-12 settings may choose to follow K-12 guidance.

Community Transmission

What is community transmission and why is it so important?

- Community transmission, also known as community spread, means the virus that causes COVID-19 is spreading and infecting people in your local area. You can check the [COVID Data Tracker](#) to determine the level of community transmission in your county.
 - The more cases there are in the community, the higher the chance that a student, educator, or staff member will come to your child's school with COVID-19. Using layered [prevention strategies](#) is critical to reduce school transmission.
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How can I find out the level of community transmission where my school is located?



- Check the [COVID Data Tracker](#) to determine the level of community transmission in your area.

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