



COVID-19 PROTOCOLS SCHOOL YEAR 2021-22

Section 1: Key definitions

This section outlines the list of COVID-19 symptoms, provides the definition of a close contact, and outlines situations where close contacts are exempt from COVID-19 testing and quarantine response protocols including isolation and quarantine.

COVID-19 symptoms

Below is the full list of symptoms for which caregivers should monitor their children, and staff should monitor themselves.^{1 2}

Unvaccinated individuals and any close contacts presenting these symptoms should follow testing and quarantine response protocols as outlined in Section 2 of this document.

Vaccinated individuals who are not close contacts should follow the testing and quarantine response protocols if they are experiencing symptoms in bold. These individuals may also seek clinical guidance to assess the need for PCR testing if they have other symptoms on this list.

COVID-19 symptoms list:

- **Fever (100.0° Fahrenheit or higher), chills, or shaking chills**
- **Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath**
- **New loss of taste or smell**
- **Muscle aches or body aches**
- Cough (not due to other known cause, such as chronic cough)
- Sore throat, *when in combination with other symptoms*
- Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea *when in combination with other symptoms*
- Headache *when in combination with other symptoms*
- Fatigue, *when in combination with other symptoms*
- Nasal congestion or runny nose (not due to other known causes, such as allergies) *when in combination with other symptoms*

Definition of a close contact

Close contacts are defined as individuals who have been within 6 feet of a COVID-19 positive individual while indoors, for at least 15 minutes during a 24-hour period.^{3 4} Please note that the at-risk exposure time begins 48 hours prior to symptom onset (or time of positive test if asymptomatic) and continues until the time the COVID-19 positive individual is isolated.

In general, close contacts should follow the testing and quarantine response protocols in Section 2 of this document. **However, certain close contacts are exempted from testing and quarantine response protocols as noted below.**

¹ Massachusetts DPH, Testing of Persons with Suspect COVID-19. (2020, May 13).

² <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>



Close contacts exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols

The following close contacts are exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols:

- **Asymptomatic, fully vaccinated close contacts:** Individuals who are asymptomatic and fully vaccinated are exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols.
- **Classroom close contacts:** An individual who is exposed to a COVID-19 positive individual in the classroom while both individuals were masked, so long as the individuals were spaced at least 3 feet apart, is exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols.
- **Bus close contacts:** Individuals on buses must be masked according to federal requirements. As such, individuals who are masked on buses when windows are open are exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols.
- **Close contacts who have had COVID-19 within the past 90 days:** An individual who has been previously diagnosed with COVID-19 and then becomes a close contact of someone with COVID-19 is exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols if:
 - o The exposure occurred within 90 days of the onset of their own illness AND
 - o The exposed individual is recovered and remains without COVID-19 symptoms

Section 2: Recommended testing and quarantine response protocols

This section outlines testing and quarantine response protocols for individuals – students and staff – who test positive for COVID-19; close contacts who are not exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols; and symptomatic individuals. Each scenario outlines the duration of any recommended quarantine or isolation, the conditions to be met in order for the individual to return to school, and any additional considerations.

Overview of Protocol Categories:

- Protocol A: For individuals who test positive for COVID-19
- Protocol B: Protocol for asymptomatic close contacts
- Protocol C: Protocol for symptomatic individuals

³ Note: To be a close contact, the 15 minutes must occur within a 24-hour period. Multiple brief or transitory interactions (less than a minute) throughout the day are unlikely to result in 15 minutes of cumulative contact and do not meet the definition of close contact.

⁴ CDC definition of Close Contact. Available at:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/operation-strategy.html>.



Protocol A: For individuals who test positive for COVID-19

Protocol A for individuals who test positive

• **Duration:** Self-isolation for COVID-19 positive cases is a minimum of 10 days after symptom onset or after positive PCR or antigen test, if asymptomatic.

• **Return to school:** After 10 days and once they have:

- Been without fever for 24 hours (and without taking fever-reducing medications); and
- Experienced improvement in other symptoms; and
- Individuals who do not meet these criteria after 10 days may receive clearance from either public health authority contact tracers (the local board of health or Community Tracing Collaborative) or school health professional before returning to school.

Note: Return to school should be based on time and symptom resolution. Repeat testing prior to return is not recommended.

Protocol B: Protocol for asymptomatic close contacts

Close contacts who are not exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols and are asymptomatic follow the guidelines in Protocol B below. Please recall that all asymptomatic, fully vaccinated individuals are exempt from close contact testing and quarantine response protocols and therefore do not need to follow Protocol B. However, fully vaccinated individuals are expected to monitor for symptoms and stay home and get tested if they experience symptoms, in alignment with statewide guidance ⁶ and Protocol C.

Note: In some cases, individuals may be asked to follow specific testing and quarantine response protocols (including durations for quarantine/isolation) provided by contact

Protocol B-1 for asymptomatic close contacts who are not exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols

- **Duration:** Quarantine is at least 7 days from the date of exposure
- **Return to School:** After 7 days, returning on day 8, provided that they:
 - Remain asymptomatic
 - Receive a COVID test (PCR) on day 5 or later and receive a negative result
 - Conduct active monitoring for symptoms through day 14, and self-isolate if symptoms develop.

Note: If an individual has symptoms at the time they are designated as a close contact or within the 14 days following initial exposure, they follow the protocol for symptomatic individuals (Protocol C). If an individual tests positive at any time, they follow the protocol for individuals who test positive for COVID-19 (Protocol A).



Protocol B-2: Alternate protocol for those who choose not to receive a COVID test

- **Duration:** Quarantine is at least 10 days from the date of exposure
- **Return to School:** After 10 days, returning on day 11, provided that they:
 - Have not experienced symptoms up to this point
 - Conduct active monitoring for symptoms through day 14 and self-isolate if symptoms develop.

Note: If an individual has symptoms at the time they are designated as a close contact or within the 14 days following initial exposure, they follow the protocol for symptomatic individuals (Protocol C). If an individual tests positive at any time, they follow the protocol for individuals who test positive for COVID-19 (Protocol A).

[Protocol C: Protocol for symptomatic individuals](#)

Protocol C applies to **vaccinated and non-vaccinated individuals** who experience the COVID-19 symptoms listed in Section 1 applicable to their status.

Protocol C for symptomatic individuals:

Protocol C-1 (Recommended): Return to school post-symptoms with test

- **Duration:** Dependent on symptom resolution
- **Return to School:** Individuals may return to school after they:
 - Have received a negative PCR test result for COVID-19. Note: So long as the individual is not a close contact, if a medical professional makes an alternative diagnosis for the COVID-19-like symptoms, the individual may use this recommendation (e.g., for influenza or strep pharyngitis) in lieu of a PCR test.
 - Have improvement in symptoms
 - Have been without fever for at least 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medications.

Note: If the symptomatic individual was a close contact who is not exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols, after symptoms resolve and they receive a negative PCR test, they should follow Protocol B-1 or B-2.

Protocol C-2: Alternative protocol for asymptomatic individual who are not close contacts and choose not to receive a COVID test to return to school

- **Duration:** Isolation is at least 10 days from symptom onset
- **Return to School:** After 10 days, returning on day 11, assuming they:
 - Have improvement in symptoms
 - Have been without fever for at least 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medication.



Section 3: Routine COVID pooled testing protocols

Routine COVID pooled testing involves combining several test samples together and then testing the group sample with a PCR test for detection of COVID-19. Testing for all consenting students and staff members will typically take place once per week.

Unvaccinated district and school staff and students who submit consent forms are strongly encouraged to participate in voluntary routine COVID pooled testing. This includes contracted staff such as bus drivers. Vaccinated staff and students may also participate in pooled testing if they submit consent forms. It is not recommended that any individual who has tested positive for COVID-19 in the past 90 days participate in pooled testing.

Protocol for routine COVID pooled testing
If the routine group pooled testing result is negative, then:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">All individuals within that group are presumed negative and should remain in school.
If the routine group pooled testing result is positive, then:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">All individuals within that group should be retested individually by rapid antigen (e.g. BinaxNOW) or PCR test.If asymptomatic, members of the group should return to school until and unless an individual is identified as positive. Individuals in the group should wear masks until the positive individual is identified.Symptomatic members of the group should stay home and follow Protocol C.

Section 4: Frequently Asked Questions

Who should receive a diagnostic test?

- If staff or students are a close contact of someone who tested positive for COVID-19, they should be tested and should follow the protocols outlined in Protocol B, unless they are exempted, as outlined above.
- If staff or students have COVID-19 symptoms, they should be tested and follow the protocols outlined in Protocol C.

Where can individuals receive an individual PCR test?

- Every school should have a list of available test sites. A [list of test sites is available here](#) and Massachusetts also has an [interactive testing map](#). Staff and students who have symptoms should also contact their primary care provider for further instructions.

When and how should BinaxNOW tests be used for diagnostic purposes?

- The BinaxNOW test is a rapid antigen test. Rapid antigen tests perform best when the person is tested in the early stages of infection with COVID-19, when the viral load is generally highest.
- When a student or staff member presents to the school health office with any symptom from the list in Section 1, they should receive a BinaxNOW test if available.



- If the result is positive, they should be sent home and follow Protocol A.
- If the result is negative, they should be sent home. The student's parent/guardian, or the staff member, should be informed that the negative test is presumptive and they should follow Protocol C.

Note: BinaxNOW tests are less sensitive and less specific than PCR tests. PCR confirmation is recommended for asymptomatic persons with a positive BinaxNOW test, and for symptomatic persons with a negative test, unless those symptoms are unlikely to be due to COVID-19. If the results are discordant, for the purposes of these protocols the PCR result would be taken as the true result, assuming the two tests are done within 2 days of each other.

How should schools address individuals with mild symptoms?

- If an individual has mild symptoms, the individual may be considered for testing using BinaxNOW, if available.
 - If the result is positive, they should be sent home and follow Protocol A.
 - If the result is negative, they should remain in school.
 - If the minimal symptom(s) persist, the individual may be re-tested within the subsequent 3 days. If symptoms worsen, the individual should seek medical care and be evaluated for the need for PCR testing.

How does contact tracing occur?

- When a person has a positive COVID-19 test, the local board of health or the Massachusetts Community Tracing Collaborative will reach out to provide support so the individual can remain safely in medical isolation. They will also ask for help to identify close contacts.
- These organizations will then reach out to the individual's close contacts to provide information to help stop the spread of the virus, including how to safely quarantine.
- To further assist with contact tracing, the student/family and staff are asked to reach out to their personal contacts and notify the school. The school should also support contact tracing efforts within the school to the extent feasible.

What additional steps should schools take if someone presents symptoms of COVID-19?

- If someone is symptomatic at school or on the bus, they should be masked immediately and evaluated by the school health professional for symptoms.
- If an individual has COVID-19 symptoms as outlined in Section 1, they should be masked, and when feasible, be in a separate room with the door closed until they can be picked up. For full guidance for school health offices, please see [Additional Information for School Health Offices](#).

What additional steps should schools take if someone tests positive for COVID-19?

- Determine if the individual was at school in the two days prior to symptom onset (or testing positive if asymptomatic) and until isolation.
 - If so, clean and disinfect the spaces an individual spent time in, if they have not already been cleaned.
- Note that for districts participating in the statewide testing program designated school staff and parents/caregivers will receive results of each individual COVID test a student takes through the testing software platform.



- Communicate with families and staff of close contacts, including informing them that:
 - There was a positive test (**do not name the specific individual**)
 - Explain that the student/staff is a “close contact” and therefore should follow the protocols for close contacts outlined in Protocol B.
 - Remind individuals of the list of COVID-19 symptoms to monitor for (see Section 1).
 - Ask them to communicate external test results to the school.

- If the school finds out about the COVID-19 positive test in the middle of the school day:
 - Make sure students who are close contacts are wearing masks.
 - If close contacts are symptomatic, they should be masked, and when feasible, be in a separate room with the door closed until they can be picked up. For full guidance for school health offices, please see [Additional Information for School Health Offices](#).

What should districts and schools do if they have a high volume of cases?

- Districts and schools can contact the DESE Rapid Response Help Center at 781-338-3500 for guidance if they are experiencing a high volume of cases. Notification should also be provided to local boards of health and district leadership.

Who should participate in routine COVID pooled testing?

- Unvaccinated district and school staff and students who submit consent forms are strongly encouraged to participate in voluntary routine COVID pooled testing. This includes contracted staff such as bus drivers.
- Vaccinated staff and students may also participate in pooled testing if they submit consent forms.
- It is not recommended that any individual who has tested positive for COVID-19 in the past 90 days participate in routine COVID pooled testing.

Who will administer routine COVID pooled testing?

- Based on guidance from DPH, staff and students who are in grades kindergarten and above are encouraged to self-administer the nasal swab under appropriate supervision and at the discretion of the trained observer.
- Tests may also be administered at school by trained onsite test specimen collectors.

How should routine COVID pooled testing be grouped?

- “Membership” within a given pooled testing group should remain consistent when feasible.
- Teachers should be tested with their students to avoid staffing issues if each teacher needs an individual re-test.
- If districts or schools strongly prefer to create pooled testing groups composed exclusively of staff, they are limited to a maximum of 5 swabs per staff-only group and must have BinaxNOW tests available for immediate follow-up testing.

How often should routine COVID pooled testing occur?

- Routine COVID pooled testing should be conducted once a week in most scenarios.



What if the follow-up tests to a positive group pooled testing result in no individual positive tests?

- In the case where a positive group pooled testing returns no BinaxNOW individual positives upon follow-up testing, all members of the group should remain in school and be tested by another BinaxNOW test 1-2 days after the initial negative result.