



**COLORADO**  
Department of Public  
Health & Environment

## COVID-19 GUIDANCE

# Questions and answers for higher education

Aug. 17, 2020

The following questions and answers supplement the Department of Higher Education's "[A Bridge to the New Normal: Planning for Return to Campus during COVID-19](#)" by providing additional definitions and recommendations for mitigating and responding to positive cases of COVID-19. With any exposure or outbreak, defined and discussed in more detail below, close coordination with your local public health agency (LPHA) is critical. The LPHA will work with the institution to determine appropriate next steps.

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### COVID-19 exposure and close contacts

#### What is a COVID-19 “exposure”?

“Exposure” consists of having had “close contact” with someone who has confirmed or probable COVID-19 during the period when that person is likely to be contagious.

Individuals with COVID-19 and symptoms are considered contagious for two days before symptoms start until 10 days after symptoms started. Individuals who are suffering from severe symptoms or who are immunocompromised should consult their medical provider to determine if they may be contagious for longer.

Individuals who test positive for COVID-19, but have not had symptoms, are considered contagious for 2 days before the test was collected and for 10 days afterward, unless they develop symptoms later.

“Close contact” is typically defined as one of the following:

- Being within 6 feet of someone who has a COVID-19 infection for at least 15 minutes total, even if that time is made up of numerous shorter intervals.
- Providing care for someone who has a COVID-19 infection without appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Having direct physical contact with someone who has a COVID-19 infection.
- Sharing eating or drinking utensils with someone who has a COVID-19 infection.
- Being exposed to the respiratory droplets of someone who is sick with COVID-19 (through sneezing, coughing, shouting, etc.).

Exposure of students in the same classroom with someone who has COVID-19 infection is determined based on a number of factors, including the classroom environment, the social distancing protocols in the classroom, the size and ventilation of the classroom, and the sanitation protocols used in the classroom.

Because class sessions typically last much longer than 15 minutes and may involve different activities and configurations, prolonged contact even at distances greater than 6 feet may make someone a “close contact.” Local public health agencies, in concert with institutions, will conduct a case investigation to determine what information and directions individuals in the impacted class should be provided. In addition contact tracing will be initiated by the appropriate local health department.

In addition, depending on the environment and types of person-to-person interactions, high-risk “close contact” exposures can occur in fewer than 15 minutes; for example, with activities like coughing, sneezing, singing or vigorous indoor exertion which are known to increase the risk of disease spread.

**If one person in a classroom is positive, does everyone in that classroom quarantine – or have they not necessarily been “exposed?”**

In some cases the whole classroom may have to quarantine, but not in all cases. Each case will be evaluated individually by local health officials, who will advise institutions as to the appropriate course of action. Local public health agencies, in concert with institutions, will conduct case investigations to aid in defining the appropriate response.

**What if a student, teacher, or staff is in contact with a person who has confirmed COVID-19 outside of school?**

Anyone who has close contact with someone with confirmed COVID-19 or new symptoms of COVID-19 should quarantine for 14 days from the date they were last with that person. People required to quarantine will be contacted by public health in collaboration with the higher ed institution.

## **Masks and social distancing**

**Are people fully protected if they wear a mask and stay 6 feet apart?**

Masking and maintaining physical distancing reduces the risk of the disease spreading. However, because no single measure is 100% protective from disease spread, people can still get COVID-19 even if they are 6 feet

apart and wearing a mask. Therefore, adherence to these guidelines does not eliminate the need to quarantine based on other factors. The local public health agency will work with the institution to determine the most appropriate course of action based on the setting. Close contacts of people with COVID-19 still must quarantine for 14 days.

### What type of face covering or mask should faculty, staff, and students wear?

Faculty, staff, and students who are not engaged in industrial or health care activities should wear a cloth face covering or mask that covers both the nose and mouth. These can either be purchased or made by individuals for their own use. Instructions are available on the [CDC website](#).

## Outbreaks

### What defines an outbreak in a university or college setting?

- **Confirmed outbreak:** Two or more people with confirmed cases of COVID-19 in a group (such as: classroom, office, lab, residential hall floor, parties, activities/events, sports teams, or shared residence such as sorority/fraternity housing) within 14 days.
- **Suspected outbreak:** Two or more people with probable cases of COVID-19 (or one confirmed and one or more probable cases) in a group (such as: classroom, office, lab, residential hall floor, parties, activities/events, sports teams, or shared residence such as sorority/fraternity housing) within 14 days.

Outbreaks must be [reported](#) to the public health agency in the county of the campus. Additional guidance for outbreak response and reporting for LPHAs is in development.

### How should an outbreak be handled?

When there is an outbreak, the main goal is to minimize spread of the virus. The primary strategy is to isolate individuals who are sick or contagious, quarantine people exposed to sick or contagious individuals, and determine if additional testing in that setting is appropriate.

- Students, faculty, and staff with either a positive test or symptoms of COVID-19 should immediately be isolated ([isolation instructions](#)) either at home (if local), in their dorm room, or in a designated isolation room for a 10-day isolation period. Work with public health to determine if it is safe and allowable to travel during isolation.

Higher-risk students, faculty, and staff should consider staying out of the workplace/classroom, even if they are not known cases of COVID-19 infection.

Individuals who have been exposed and in close contact to someone who has symptoms of COVID-19 or a positive COVID-19 test should monitor for symptoms of COVID-19 and seek testing if symptoms develop. Contacts who remain asymptomatic may consider obtaining testing between 7 and 10 days after their exposure to assist in the detection of asymptomatic or early secondary infections. However, a negative test does not shorten the quarantine period (14 days).

## What do we need to do if there is an outbreak?

- Compile information on all individuals with recent exposure to assist with the local public health agency's investigation.
- Close off areas used by sick people until cleaning can be completed.
- Open outside doors and windows and use ventilating fans to increase air circulation in the area. Wait 24 hours or as long as practical before beginning cleaning and disinfection.
- Perform enhanced cleaning and disinfection, focusing on frequently touched surfaces (i.e., doorknobs, desks, clickers, lightswitches).

## Tests

### How reliable are tests?

Tests are a critical tool that should be considered alongside other tools. Like all testing, COVID-19 tests can produce both false negative and false positive results. People can have COVID-19 and receive a negative test result if they get tested soon after the start of their infection. Individuals who have been exposed to COVID-19 must quarantine even if they have a negative test.

### Can testing “clear” students or staff if they have recently had a high risk exposure?

Testing by itself cannot “clear” students, teachers, or staff. Individuals who have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 may test negative initially, but later develop symptoms and be contagious. With ongoing community spread in Colorado and elsewhere in the United States, an individual who tests negative initially could also later become infected with the virus. Individuals who have been exposed to COVID-19 must quarantine even if they have a negative test.

### How often should faculty, staff, and students be tested?

In most circumstances, CDPHE does not recommend routine testing of healthy students, faculty, or staff. Testing should only occur 7 days after a person is exposed to a person with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 or if they develop symptoms.

### Types of tests:

- **RT-PCR/nucleic acid tests:** These are the primary types of tests used to confirm current COVID-19 infection. These tests are considered the most reliable, but they take longer to analyze -- it could take several days to get results.
- **Antigen tests:** These tests also can be used to confirm a COVID-19 infection, but can produce a false negative in some cases. The results of antigen tests may be available in under an hour. Health care providers may want to conduct a RT-PCR/nucleic acid test to confirm the results of a negative antigen test.

- **Antibody (serological) tests:** These tests can detect the presence of antibodies, which might show evidence of a current or past COVID-19 infection. These tests currently cannot determine if the person is still contagious or if they are immune to COVID-19. Do not use antibody tests to prove immunity, clear employees to work, or make decisions about grouping people in congregate settings, such as schools, dormitories, or correctional facilities.

CDPHE does not recommend re-testing people who have already been confirmed to have COVID-19 for at least 90 days, except in rare circumstances in discussion with public health or a provider.

## Closures and online learning

### When should a classroom implement online or remote learning?

Institutions should work closely with local public health agencies to determine the best course of action if one or more cases of COVID-19 are detected in a classroom. A classroom may be advised to **temporarily move to online learning** if an outbreak is detected and may elect to implement online learning if a large number of students or instructors are unable to attend in-person classes.

### Would a closure apply to a classroom or an entire building?

The extent of a closure will depend on numerous factors. Work with the local public health agency to determine the best course of action.

## Additional resources

There are many resources available to colleges and universities as they work to plan a safe and productive academic year, including:

- [CDC COVID-19 Guidance for Colleges and Universities](#)
- [CDPHE COVID-19 guidance by sector](#)
- [CDPHE COVID-19 guidance for higher education](#)
- [Find your Local Public Health Agency](#)