COVID-19

What You Should Know About COVID-19 Testing in Schools

Updated Jan. 6, 2022

As schools go back to in-person learning, some may offer regular COVID-19 testing for students and staff. This means testing is offered regularly, even for people who don't have symptoms of COVID-19. Many schools will also offer testing for people with symptoms of COVID-19 or who have been exposed to someone with COVID-19. Schools do not need to require a negative test result for students, teachers, and staff to return to school after breaks. Students, teachers, and staff who travel during breaks should follow CDC testing recommendations for domestic and international travel.

Regular COVID–19 Testing Protects Everyone

Regular testing, in addition to COVID-19 vaccination, is a safe, effective way to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and help keep schools open for in-person learning. Many people with COVID-19, especially children and teens, don't have symptoms but can still spread the virus, so regular testing helps find people who have the virus before it can spread to others. This is especially important for children who are not yet vaccinated against COVID-19, families and staff with younger children at home, those at risk for getting seriously sick from COVID-19, and those who are not fully vaccinated against COVID-19. Finding who has the virus early means steps can be taken to prevent COVID-19 from spreading and causing an outbreak, so schools can stay open. Regular testing also means parents or guardians get notified if their child tests positive, allowing them to plan for treatment and take steps to protect the rest of the family from COVID-19.

Regular testing will help keep students in the classroom and allows them to take part in the other activities they love.

COVID–19 Tests are Free, Quick, and Easy

The tests are free, quick, and easy and will help to tell if students or staff have COVID-19, even if they do not have symptoms.

Schools may choose to use either a nasal test, using a swab for the lower part of the inner nostril, or a saliva test, which takes a saliva (spit) sample. The nasal test is not painful and does **not** use the longer swab that reaches higher into the nose.

Staff will not be tested without consent. Students will not be tested without the consent of both the student and their guardian.

If a Student or Staff Member Tests Positive

If someone at school tests positive for COVID-19, they will be asked to stay home for at least 5 full days (day 0 is the first day of symptoms or the day of the positive viral test for asymptomatic persons). Anyone who tests positive will also be asked about people they have been around so that everyone who has been exposed can be notified. People who have been exposed may also need to stay home, depending on their vaccination and booster status or history of prior infection in the past 90 days , and follow the school's policies. When someone tests positive, having them stay home for at least 5 days (even if they have no symptoms of COVID-19) reduces the risk of the virus spreading to others at school, preventing an outbreak and keeping schools open. For more details about staying at home when sick with COVID-19, see the Overview of COVID-19 Isolation for K-12 Schools.

Test to Stay

Test to Stay (TTS) combines contact tracing and serial testing (testing that is repeated at least twice during a seven-day period after last close contact with a person with COVID-19) to allow some students, teachers and staff who should quarantine to continue in-person learning. This includes people who are a school-associated close contact, are not fully vaccinated, do not test positive for SARS-CoV-2, and have no symptoms. TTS participants should get tested at least upon notification of their close contact and again on 5-7 days after their last close contact with someone with COVID-19.

Students who participate in Test to Stay should wear well-fitting masks while in school and should stay home and isolate if they develop symptoms or test positive for SARS-CoV-2. In the studies done in Illinois and California, to qualify for Test to Stay, both the person with COVID-19 and the close contact had to be properly masked at the time of exposure. Schools considering Test to Stay should have robust contact tracing in place and access to testing resources (for example, testing supplies and personnel to conduct testing, or access to an existing community testing site), among other layered prevention strategies. Testing frequency after a close contact can vary (for example, from twice in a seven-day period to daily), but more frequent testing can more quickly identify students who become infected with SARS-CoV-2 and need to isolate.

Schools may consider Test to Stay as an option for keeping asymptomatic school-associated close contacts in the classroom as an alternative to traditional quarantine at home. Because Test to Stay can be resource intensive, it may not be a viable option for every school. School district administrators and local public health agencies should make efforts to ensure that such strategies, if offered, are available in an equitable way among students and across schools and comply with all applicable laws, regulations, and policies, including those related to privacy and confidentiality. Administrators should ensure that students who are isolating or in quarantine at home have adequate access to remote learning options and that they and their families receive support and follow-up to promote learning and minimize disruption.

Related Pages

> K-12 Schools Guidance

> Testing Strategies for SARS-CoV-2

> Considerations for Case Investigation and Contact Tracing in K-12 Schools and Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs)

> Types of Masks

> Vaccines for COVID-19

More Information

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