Public Health Guidance for School Testing for COVID-19

Updated 01/23/2024

The Pennsylvania Department of Health (PA DOH) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) encourage students and staff to stay home if showing signs or [symptoms](#) of respiratory or gastrointestinal infections such as cough, fever, sore throat, diarrhea, etc. [Testing](#) is recommended for people with symptoms consistent with COVID-19. Testing should occur immediately after symptoms begin or at least 5 days after the last exposure to a person who recently tested positive with COVID-19. PA DOH and CDC encourage schools to provide access to over-the counter (OTC) tests for students, teachers, and staff to manage COVID-19 in K-12 school settings.

Staying home when sick can lower the risk of spreading infectious diseases, including COVID-19, to other people. For more information on staying home when sick with COVID-19, including recommendations for those experiencing symptoms consistent with COVID-19, or exposed persons, see [Isolation and Precautions for People with COVID-19 | CDC](#).

When to Get Tested for COVID-19

Individuals with symptoms should isolate and test immediately.
- A PCR test will provide a more reliable negative result.
- A positive antigen test result is reliable, but a negative test is not always accurate.
  - If the antigen test is negative, individuals should take another antigen test after 48 hours **or** take a PCR test as soon as possible.
- If an individual tests negative for COVID-19 but shows symptoms, they should consider getting tested for other respiratory illnesses that could spread to others, such as [Flu, and RSV.](#)

If the individual is not experiencing symptoms but has been exposed to COVID-19, they should wait at least 5 full days after the last exposure before seeking testing.

Testing can be helpful in circumstances when the individual doesn't have symptoms or a recent exposure to COVID-19, such as before an event or visiting someone at higher risk. An individual should test as close to the time of the event as possible (at least within 1-2 days) to help make informed decision about their health and spreading COVID-19 to others. If the individual uses an antigen test, they should follow the recommendation for repeat testing to be confident in a negative result. Additionally, some places may test people without symptoms or a recent exposure to help keep COVID-19 from spreading to others, especially those who are at higher risk for severe illness.

Diagnostic Testing

Schools can offer diagnostic testing for students and staff with symptoms of COVID-19 or who were exposed to someone with COVID-19 in the K-12 setting, or refer them to a community testing site, healthcare provider, or use an at-home test. Each COVID-19 test with an emergency use authorization (EUA) has a minimum age requirement. Schools should only use tests that are appropriate for the individual being tested. For proper usage of any brand OTC test kits, please visit At-Home OTC COVID-19 Diagnostic Tests | FDA For more information on when an individual should test, please visit COVID-19 Testing: What You Need to Know | CDC.

If you have any additional questions on testing, please email, ra-dhk12covidtest@pa.gov

Screening Testing

Screening testing identifies individuals with COVID-19 who do not have symptoms or known or suspected exposures, so that steps can be taken to prevent further spread of COVID-19.

CDC no longer recommends routine screening testing in K-12 schools. However, when COVID-19 hospital admission levels are high, K-12 schools can consider implementing screening testing for students and staff for high-risk activities (e.g.., close contact sports, band, choir, etc.); at key

times in the year, for example before/after large events (e.g., prom, tournaments, group travel); and when returning from breaks (e.g., holidays, spring break, at the beginning of the school year). When conducting screening testing, both vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals should be included. Schools serving students who are at risk for getting very sick with COVID-19, such as those with moderate or severe immunocompromise or complex medical conditions, can consider implementing screening testing at a medium or high COVID-19 hospital admission level. [Nucleic acid amplification tests (NAATs)](#) and [antigen](#) tests can be used for screening purposes; however, the school should consider the [characteristics of different test types](#) to determine which best suits their particular need. Schools that choose to rely on at-home antigen test kits for screening testing should ensure equal access and availability to the tests, establish accessible systems that are in place for ensuring timely reporting of positive results to the school, and communicate with families the importance of following isolation guidance for any individuals who test positive.

Any individual who tests positive for COVID-19, regardless of symptoms, should isolate at home in accordance with [CDC Isolation and Precautions guidance](#).

Screening testing should be done in a way that ensures the ability to maintain confidentiality of results and protect privacy. Consistent with state legal requirements and [Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)](#), K-12 schools should obtain parental consent for minor students and assent/consent from students themselves, when applicable.

For additional information on which COVID-19 test to select, see [COVID-19 Testing: What You Need to Know | CDC](#).

Getting a COVID-19 Test

Order Free at-home tests

Four (4) free at-home COVID-19 tests are available for U.S households through the federal government at [COVID.gov/tests](#).

<u>Testing locations</u>

- Individuals can seek testing through their Primary Care Physician (PCP).
- Individuals can also visit COVID-19 Testing Locator for low-or- no-cost PCR or antigen testing through local pharmacies and labs.
- Individuals can find free testing through their Local Federally Qualified Health Center.

School administrators and nurses can contact their local intermediate unit for additional testing support.

If you have additional questions, please contact 1-877- PA-Health.

Additional Resources

COVID-19 Testing: What You Need to Know | CDC

Operational Guidance for K-12 Schools and Early Care and Education Programs to Support Safe In-Person Learning | CDC

Protect yourself from COVID-19, Flu, and RSV (cdc.gov)

Respiratory Virus Data Channel Weekly Snapshot (cdc.gov)

PA DOH COVID-19 Resources for Schools

Increasing Community Access to Testing (ICATT) for COVID-19 (cdc.gov)

In Vitro Diagnostics EUAs - Antigen Diagnostic Tests for SARS-CoV-2 | FDA

Federally Qualified Health Center-PACHC