

COVID-19 Community Conversation

School Superintendents & Independent Schools

Sept 9-11, 2020

Thank you for participating in the virtual Community Conversations hosted by Dr. Kristin Klein, AHS Medical Officer of Health - Communicable Disease Control, and Dr. Kathryn Koliaska, AHS Medical Officer of Health and Provincial Lead - Safe Healthy Environments.

Our intention with these events is to help you understand and implement the COVID-19 guidelines set by the Province of Alberta for schools, and to identify where there are gaps in our advice or communication that we need to address. Our goal is to effectively work with you to protect and support school staff, students, and families across Alberta.

We appreciate your commitment to supporting and protecting your staff and students.

Please find below links to resources that were discussed during our virtual session. We have also summarized the conversation and provided links to resources related to the topics that raised multiple questions.

We would like to thank you for the suggestions you made and the advice you provided as to how we can increase the clarity of our resources and the recommendations we are providing to you, your staff and parents. We have quite a few items to take away for follow up with our colleagues including the review of existing documents for consistency, and the development of visuals to increase clarity.

Please note: Every effort has been made to provide accurate and timely information, however the advice and recommendations being provided by AHS are changing as we gather new information and research. The information below is accurate as of September 20, 2020. For the most current information on the situation in Alberta, please visit ahs.ca/covid and [COVID-19 info for Schools](#).

If you have any follow up questions or comments please email: Community.Engagement@ahs.ca. You can also subscribe to AHS's weekly stakeholder e-newsletter through this email.

For questions and support regarding enhanced health and safety measures, contact your local [Environmental Public Health Office](#). For more information about supporting student health and wellness in your school, visit [Information for Schools and Educators](#).

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Symptoms and School Attendance

[Symptoms](#) for COVID-19 are similar to those for influenza or other respiratory illnesses. Anyone who has the following symptoms are legally required to self-isolate and should be tested for COVID-19: fever, new onset of cough or worsening chronic cough, new or worsening shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, sore throat and runny nose.

If you are not tested for COVID-19, you MUST self-isolate for 10 days following the start of these symptoms and until you are feeling better (whichever is longer). If you are tested, [further instructions are available](#) based on your test results.

People with other symptoms are also recommended to be tested. These include: chills, painful swallowing, stuffy nose, headache, muscle or joint ache, feeling unwell, fatigue or severe exhaustion, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea or unexplained loss of appetite, loss of sense of smell or taste, and conjunctivitis (pink eye).

If you have these secondary symptoms, it is strongly advised that you stay home and minimize contact with others until you are feeling better. Complete the [COVID-19 Self-Assessment](#) for more information.

Everyone (*including those under 18 years of age*) in mandatory isolation and in need of COVID-19 testing, or critical care for pre-existing medical conditions or emergency care, should carefully follow the rules in the [exemption orders](#).

Should schools be temperature checking each morning?

Schools are not expected to temperature check. This should be the responsibility of the parent as they conduct daily health screening before school and monitor their children for symptoms.

Do schools need to record symptoms of students calling in sick? Are we responsible for keeping track that they are isolating for the required amount of time?

COVID-19 has led to some changes in how we apply our regular outbreak identification strategies in schools, including having schools report absenteeism. Work is underway at AHS to confirm expectations for collecting and reporting this information to AHS. Once further direction is available we will share with our school partners.

For now schools are asked to keep attendance records for contact tracing purposes so contact tracers know who is in a particular class at any time. Parents are responsible for ensuring they follow Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH) order requirements for [isolation](#).

Should individuals have a baseline COVID 19 test for their chronic health conditions?

AHS recommends that one initial baseline test is obtained, if an individual has symptoms related to a chronic condition that are reflective of COVID-19, to ensure that the symptoms are indeed related to the chronic condition – and not COVID. If symptoms change or worsen, the parent would be asked to identify that on screening and keep the student home and get them tested again.

AHS is not requiring physician's notes for chronic symptoms. A conversation between schools and parents is sufficient. We trust that parents are very familiar with their student's "normal" and would know when symptoms exceed that.

I've had people who tested positive to COVID say they are now immune. Is that accurate?

It is too early to know the effect of COVID infection on the development of long-term immunity. Alberta Health Service's Scientific Advisory Group (SAG) is continuing to monitor the worldwide research on this question.

Wearing Masks

AHS' advice on preventing the spread of COVID-19, including how to wear masks, can be found [here](#). Watch this [video](#) to learn how to properly don and doff (put on and take off) a mask to keep yourself and others safe. There is also [Guidance for Wearing Non-Medical Face Masks](#) for the general public.

Alberta Health's specific directions on the wearing of masks in schools can be found [here](#).

Alberta Health Service's Scientific Advisory Group (SAG) - comprised of clinicians, researchers and other experts who review emerging evidence and provide research informed guidance - developed this review on the [effectiveness of wearing masks to reduce spread of COVID-19 in the community](#).

We understand students don't need to have mask on during instruction when seated facing forward, but given classroom configurations and seating this is not possible in many high school classrooms.

Would the recommendation be to wear masks at all times in these classrooms?

Please review the specific directions on masking available from both AHS and Alberta Health. Also keep in mind that wearing masks is one aspect of COVID prevention, along with physical distancing, cohorting, hand hygiene and regular cleaning of high touch surfaces.

If there is no way to shift seating, and students, for example, are directly facing one another without proper distancing, the school may want to additionally consider masking. Given the unique situation in each school and classroom, AHS suggests speaking to your local health inspector, or even asking them to visit your site to discuss specific recommendations.

We recognize that some schools and school jurisdictions have implemented their own masking guidelines, and encourage students and parents to be aware of these specific requirements for their schools.

Are masks with valves appropriate?

Although there is no restriction of valve masks specifically in guidance documents, there is a fair bit of evidence that they are much less effective at preventing droplet spread, and we would not recommend masks with valves.

How about face shields?

Face shields are designed to be used in addition to masks, and are substantially less effective than masks. Face shields, or other face coverings, would not be considered a sufficient replacement to masks.

What is AHS' guidance on neck gators and lanyards?

Lanyards are not ideal as masks will be hanging from the student's neck and will be at risk of becoming contaminated. Lanyards may pose a strangulation risk; and if used, must be a breakaway style for safety.

Neck gators do not offer the same level of protection as masks, and may also pose risk of improper storage and contamination (pulling on and off over the head).

Please clarify the advice about non-medical vs. medical mask use when determining a close contact.

AHS recommends teachers, staff and students wear a non-medical mask in the school setting. However, in cases of close contact (i.e., when a student in a class tests positive, or an adult has interacted with a ill student at school), a non-medical mask would not be considered sufficient protection as we cannot guarantee that their mask was properly donned and doffed (put on and taken off) outside of a medical environment.

For contact tracing the teacher and all students in the classroom with the COVID positive student would be considered close contacts – regardless of whether they were wearing a non-medical mask.

Isolation & Return to School

Symptomatic students: If a student or staff member is symptomatic they should not be at school and should complete testing. If the test is positive for COVID, they are legally required to self-isolate for 10 days, or until their symptoms resolve, whichever is longer.

If a student or staff member is waiting for swab results, or chooses not to complete testing, the following requirements apply:

- The legal requirement for isolation (10 days or until symptoms resolve) applies to those who exhibit any one of the "top 5" [symptoms for COVID-19](#).
- If the symptoms are in the [second list of symptoms](#) (e.g. headache), the student/staff can return once their symptoms resolve - as long as they do not have another reason for needing to isolate, such as being a close contact of a confirmed case.

Asymptomatic close contacts of a positive case: AHS will order close contacts of a positive case of COVID-19 to isolate for the duration of the incubation period (14 days, independent of swab result). A negative COVID-19 test does not shorten exclusion time. The student/staff member cannot return to school until their isolation period is complete.

COVID-19 testing is offered to all Albertans free of charge. Testing appointments are easily booked online by visiting www.ahs.ca/testing. Albertans can also call [Health Link](#) at 811 and staff will book a test appointment.

The length of time for test results is making this process difficult and creating stress for our staff.

AHS continues to see increased demand for COVID-19 testing, which is resulting in increased wait-times for testing appointments and results. Additional staff have been deployed to assist with this demand for appointments, testing and call backs. Also, additional staff have been deployed at assessment centres and hours have been extended to help with the increased demand.

If a family member returns from out of country do all family members have to self-isolate?

No, only the individual who was out of country must isolate. Family members are not required to self-isolate, unless the person in their household begins to exhibit symptoms.

Can you please clarify why a student with symptoms has tested negative still needs to stay home?

When a student, staff member or teacher is symptomatic they may be spreading another virus, even if they do not have COVID-19. We therefore encourage those who are ill to stay home.

What is the difference between a sore throat (top five) and painful swallowing (on secondary list)?

A sore throat is continuously painful, whereas with painful swallowing, the throat is only sore during the swallowing motion.

Hygiene and Cleaning

Alberta Health Services has extensive advice available on the cleaning of [public buildings and spaces](#). Additional information can be found through [Alberta Biz Connect](#).

What is AHS' advice on portable air cleaners?

If you are wondering about the safety of a particular device contact your local public health inspector.

We have high touch cleaning occurring throughout the day and deep overnight cleaning. However, what about open spaces - do they need to be cleaned between each cohort?

Ideally, shared spaces should be cleaned and disinfected between cohorts. Higher contact equipment or furniture (e.g. chairs, tables, and computers) is greater risk than environmental surfaces such as floors. If students are just passing through the risk is also lower.

We are using a spray disinfectant on buses and in schools. Besides waiting a minimum of ten minutes before entry onto a bus or into a classroom, are there any extra steps that should be taken to ensure students/staff are kept safe from the product following any application?

Waiting the required contact time and allowing 10 minutes dry time are sufficient safety measures. The disinfectant will dissipate as the surface dries and would not pose a hazard to students.

Please ensure that disinfectant is stored out of reach of younger children.

Should singing and wind instruments be allowed at this time?

Singing is a higher risk activity for transmission of COVID. If singing is desired in the curriculum, please review the [Singing and Vocal performance guidance](#) available on Alberta Health's website.

Wind instruments need additional control measures such as extra distancing and bell covers. Please review the [Guidance for Instrumental Music](#) available on Alberta Health's website.

Playground equipment can be used as long as hand sanitizing before and after but it states that shared materials in the classroom (like Kindergarten centers) should not be used - why is it OK to share playground equipment and not to do it in the classroom?

There is some decreased risk in outdoor environments on play surfaces. While shared equipment in classrooms should be avoided when possible, some may be unavoidable, and hand hygiene before and after handling is recommended.

What is AHS' advice on parent volunteers assisting in the school, particularly in relation to food service?

Limiting volunteers and extra visitors to schools is advised. Screening, increased disinfection and hygiene, distancing during food preparation and delivery are all measures that should be strictly in place. You may wish to ask your public health inspector to come review your operation and provide specific recommendations.

Contact Tracing & Communication

Can you please define 'close contact' criteria?

When there is a case of COVID in a school while infectious, anyone who has been within two metres of that person for more than 15 minutes would be considered a close contact. Also, anyone who shared food or drink, or had contact such as hugging and kissing is a close contact.

Generally speaking, a close contact at school is:

- Anyone who shares a classroom with a positive case
- Anyone seated within 2 rows of a positive case on a school bus (in front or behind)

Who advises an individual that they are a close contact of a positive case and must self-isolate?

AHS Public Health will work with schools to contact students/parents/guardians who have been in close contact with a positive case (e.g., grade-level cohorts or other class groups), and to determine which school staff members are close contacts.

AHS Public Health contacts all positive cases of COVID-19, or the guardians of a minor, to notify them of their status, to provide advice as to how they can protect themselves and others (including instructions for isolation), and to start the contact tracing process.

Additional [advice is available for people tested for COVID-19](#).

We have experienced a delay between when an individual finds out about their positive result and when AHS contacts the school jurisdiction. There also have been further delay in terms of AHS authorizing school jurisdiction communications to the community. Will any of these delays be addressed?

We recognize that individuals and families may hear they have a positive test, prior to the school or school jurisdiction. AHS will reach out to the school or school division – if required – as soon as possible. If the individual with the positive test has not been at the school while infectious, the school would not need to be contacted. [AHS needs to speak to the individual to understand the risk before advising the school.](#)

How will AHS contact school authorities and schools outside of school hours, when it may be difficult to reach a school principal directly? How can schools contact AHS?

Alberta Education and CASS sent out a survey to gather superintendent contacts for evening and weekend hours. This list has been provided to AHS Public Health to contact schools and school divisions outside of regular office hours. AHS' Communicable Disease Team works from 7 am through 11 pm, seven days a week.

AHS is also launching a phone number for schools and school jurisdictions to use to receive information, ask questions and report concerns. School administrators may call AHS' Coordinated Early Identification and Response Line at **1-844-343-0971** for information and support - *starting September 28*.

Prior to the launch of AHS' Coordinated Early Identification and Response Line, Superintendents can call the CDC number they were provided by AHS.

Do the numbers for determining an alert or outbreak include staff, or just students?

Both staff and students are included.

If the two cases associated with a school are from the same household, is the school considered under outbreak?

Any two cases of COVID who were present at school while infectious would meet the definition of an outbreak; this could include cases within the same household. There does not have to be any evidence of transmission within the school. In addition, we would also include cases in the outbreak that acquired disease in the school. For example, a close contact of a school case that then becomes a case themselves should be included in the outbreak although hopefully they are in isolation and would not be at school while infectious.

Outbreak Inclusions:

- Any students or staff that attended school while infectious
- Any student or staff where the most likely site of acquisition is the school. These are assessed on a case by case basis; consult with the Medical Officer of Health (MOH) as required.
- Parent volunteers that are at school or support persons providing services in schools are included if the services are related to educational programs or supports needed for students in class.
- Cases must be related to physical attendance at school for school based programming, such as staff meetings and other education or academic programs.

Outbreak Exclusions

- Does not include cases attending community programs using the school space (indoor or outdoor).
- Does not include students attending at home learning.
- Out of School care programs should be considered in the context of daycare outbreak reporting. They may also be included in a school outbreak if relevant.

Helpful Links and Resources

AHS Resources for Schools: ahs.ca/covidschools (**new!**)

Alberta Government Return to Schools Guidance: alberta.ca/returntoschool

Alberta COVID Stats: <https://www.alberta.ca/stats/covid-19-alberta-statistics.htm>

Public Health Orders: <https://www.alberta.ca/covid-19-orders-and-legislation.aspx>

COVID-19 Symptoms: <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page16997.aspx#sign>

Cohort Groups: <https://www.alberta.ca/restrictions-on-gatherings.aspx>

Health Canada approved hard-surface disinfectants: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/disinfectants/covid-19/list.html>

Further guidance on cleaning: <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/ppih/if-ppih-covid-19-environmental-cleaning-public-facilities.pdf>

AHS Signage & Posters: <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page17000.aspx>

Alberta Government Signage & Posters: <https://www.alberta.ca/covid-19-information-posters.aspx>

Alberta Biz Connect: <https://www.alberta.ca/biz-connect.aspx>

Flow Chart for School Notifications (page 23 of Outbreak Resource Guide): <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/covid-19-in-school-k-12-resource-guide-for-schools-before-during-and-after-a-covid-19-outbreak>