

# Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LAC DPH) COVID-19 and Acute Respiratory Illness (ARI) Guidelines for Education Settings

## Summary of recent changes (April 3, 2024)

- Updated reporting requirements: Schools should use a symptom-based approach for identifying and reporting COVID-19 and ARI clusters. See details [below](#) and at [ph.lacounty.gov/covidreporting](https://ph.lacounty.gov/covidreporting).

Education settings are crucial in preventing the spread of Acute Respiratory Illness (ARI), including COVID-19, flu, RSV, and other communicable diseases.

These guidelines aim to support safe in-person learning in LA County by detailing preventive strategies and actions. They apply to Early Care and Education (ECE) sites, TK-12 schools, youth programs, and Institutes of Higher Education (IHE).

The term “site” encompasses all facility types, “student” refers to all participants, and “staff” includes all working individuals at the site. Additional resources for education sites are in the [LAC DPH Respiratory Illness Education Toolkit](#) and the [Acute Communicable Disease Control \(ACDC\) Schools Toolkit](#).

## Summary of required actions

- 1) Required:** Site must develop policies and make every effort to enforce [LAC DPH Instructions for COVID-19 Cases and Close Contacts](#).
- 2) Required:** As employers, sites must adhere to all requirements outlined by [Cal/OSHA COVID-19 Prevention Non-Emergency Regulations](#). This includes notifying staff known COVID-19 exposure and actions to take.
- 3) Required:** Report clusters of cases as outlined in the [Reporting](#) section below. Cluster reporting is done online at [spot.cdph.ca.gov](https://spot.cdph.ca.gov) and must occur within 1 business day of cluster identification.
- 4) Required:** If LAC DPH determines outbreak criteria have been met, site must comply with requirements issued by LAC DPH Outbreak Investigation Team. In addition, site must follow Outbreak regulations as outlined by [Cal/OSHA](#).
- 5) Required:** Each Local Education Agency (LEA) is required to develop a COVID-19 testing plan per [State Bill 1479](#). See [Senate Bill 1479 Implementation Questions and Answers](#) for details.

## Best Practices for Prevention & Response

Acute Respiratory Illness (ARI) includes conditions triggered by various pathogens, such as COVID-19, influenza (flu), and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). ARI symptoms often mimic those of the common cold, including fever or chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, difficulty breathing, and body aches. Most people recover on their own without complications, but some people are at [higher risk of getting very sick](#).

To reduce the risk of disease transmission and severe outcomes, promote immunization, enhance hygiene, improve air quality, and enforce testing and masking policies. Designate a staff member as a Communicable Diseases (CD) liaison for LAC DPH communication. For an overview of key prevention strategies, visit [CDC's Preventing Respiratory Viruses](#). For additional details including local resources, visit the [LAC DPH Respiratory Illness Education Toolkit](#).

Ensure compliance with State COVID-19 testing plan requirements (e.g., [SB-1479](#)) and the [Cal/OSHA COVID-19 Prevention Non-Emergency Regulations](#). Facilities licensed by the Community Care Licensing Division (CCLD) should review the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) [Provider Information Notices \(PINs\)](#) for all licensing requirements. Where differences exist between the most current PINs, Cal/OSHA, CDPH, and LA County, sites are to follow the most protective guidance and requirements.

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## Responding to COVID-19 in Education Settings

Education settings must investigate and manage any COVID-19 cases identified at the site. Current State laws mandate the exclusion of anyone with a communicable disease that poses a risk to others.<sup>1</sup> Individuals are responsible for adhering to [LAC DPH Instructions for COVID-19 Cases and Close Contacts](#). These instructions are outlined below and are intended to support education settings in developing and implementing exclusion and return to school criteria related to COVID-19. As employers, education settings must also refer to the [Cal/OSHA COVID-19 Prevention Non-Emergency Regulations](#) for COVID-19 workplace requirements.

### Staff and Students with Symptoms of a Possible Acute Respiratory Infection

People with symptoms of possible acute respiratory infection should wear a mask, stay home and away from others, and test for COVID-19. Those who test negative using an antigen test but continue having COVID-19 symptoms should continue to isolate and test again 48 hours later. Consult [LAC DPH Symptom Guidance for Schools](#) for additional recommendations.

### Staff and Students with COVID-19 (Cases)

Staff and students with a COVID-19 infection need to adhere to these instructions regardless of their vaccination status, history of previous infection, or lack of symptoms. For the full guidance, refer to [LAC DPH Instructions for COVID-19 Cases and Close Contacts](#).

#### 1. Isolate (Stay Home)

Staff and students with COVID-19 must stay home and away from others if symptomatic and/or with fever. Isolation can end when both of the following criteria are met:

- Have not had a fever for 24 hours without taking medication that reduces fevers **AND**
- Other symptoms are not present or are mild and improving.

*Additionally:*

- Staff and students with COVID-19 who **do not have symptoms** are not required to isolate **only if** wearing a high-quality mask in all settings when around others, for 10 days after first testing positive.
- A person leaving isolation prior to 10 days from the date of a positive test and/or onset of symptoms is required to [wear a mask](#) when around others for the 10 days.
- It is strongly recommended that an individual test for COVID-19 prior to ending isolation and extend isolation until day 10 if they continue to test positive.
- Schools can continue to implement more protective policies including adhering to the prior guidance on isolation for those testing positive for COVID-19, particularly among high-risk settings with medically complex students.

#### 2. Wear a mask

All individuals with COVID-19 shall wear a well-fitting, high-quality mask for a total of 10 days from symptom onset or their first positive test date (if asymptomatic) when around others. This includes individuals who test positive and have no symptoms or only mild symptoms.

- Masks can be removed sooner if the individual meets the criteria to end isolation and obtains two sequential negative tests taken at least one day apart.

#### 3. Tell close contacts

Close contacts should be informed that they may be infected, so that they are aware and can take appropriate next steps to protect themselves and others within their community. For more information, see [Communication and Notifications About Exposures](#) section below.

<sup>1</sup> [Title 17 California Code of Regulations, section 2526](#); [Title 5 California Code of Regulations, section 202](#); [California Health and Safety Code, section 120230](#)

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## *Additional Considerations*

- Individuals whose symptoms return or worsen after initially improving may have [COVID-19 rebound](#) and should stay home and retest with an antigen test.
- [Support students](#) who are learning at home if they are sick. Ensure that employees are not penalized when they stay home due to illness.

## **Staff and Students Exposed to COVID-19 (Close Contacts)**

The term close contact refers to the following:

- **In indoor spaces of 400,000 or fewer cubic feet per floor** (such as classrooms and offices): A close contact is defined as sharing the same indoor airspace for a cumulative total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period (for example, three individual 5-minute exposures for a total of 15 minutes) during a confirmed case's infectious period.
- **In large indoor spaces greater than 400,000 cubic feet per floor** (such as open-floor-plan offices, warehouses, and some gymnasiums): A close contact is defined as being within 6 feet of the infected person for a cumulative total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period during the confirmed case's infectious period.

Exposed staff and students should:

1. [Wear a well-fitting mask](#) around others for 10 days after last exposure.
  - Children under 2 years should not wear a mask but may remain at the facility if they are monitored for symptoms.
2. **Monitor for symptoms** for 10 days after last exposure. If symptoms develop, stay home away from others and test immediately.
3. [Get tested](#) within 3-5 days after last exposure. If recently recovered from COVID-19 in the last 90 days, review [testing recommendations](#). Staff who are exposed at work must have access to COVID-19 testing available at no cost during paid time in a manner that ensures confidentiality. See [Cal/OSHA FAQ - Testing](#). Employers are required to follow guidance in [Cal/OSHA COVID-19 Prevention Non-Emergency Regulations](#). See also LAC DPH's [Responding to COVID-19 in the Workplace](#).

## **Communication and Notifications About Exposures**

Parents should immediately inform the site when a student tests positive for COVID-19 and was on site while infectious. When sites are notified of a COVID-19 exposure on site, it is strongly recommended that they notify students who were exposed and provide them with instruction for close contacts (above). If an individual with COVID-19 participated in any games, performances, tournaments, competitions, or other site-related activities involving other sites while symptomatic, it is strongly recommended that the CD liaison notify the impacted site(s). Sites are required to notify employees if they have been exposed to a known COVID-19 case in the workplace during the case's infectious period per Cal/OSHA COVID-19 Prevention Non-Emergency Regulations.

## **Outbreaks**

If LAC DPH determines that outbreak criteria have been met, a Public Health Outbreak Investigator will contact the site to coordinate an Outbreak Investigation. During the Outbreak, the site must comply with additional requirements issued by LAC DPH. The site is also responsible for complying with regulations outlined per [Cal/OSHA COVID-19 Prevention Non-Emergency Regulations](#).

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## LAC DPH Respiratory Virus Reporting Requirements

COVID-19 reporting is now incorporated into the existing symptom-based reporting protocol for acute respiratory illness (ARI).

An **ARI case** is defined as a person with the new onset of two or more of the following symptoms: fever or chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, difficulty breathing, and body aches; **OR** a person who has tested positive for a specific respiratory infection, such as COVID-19, Influenza, or RSV.

Per the [LA County Health Officer Order](#), the CD liaison is required to notify LAC DPH within 24 hours when either of the following criteria are met:

- 1) In an epidemiologically linked group (e.g., classroom, sports team, after-school group):**
  - A minimum of 5\* cases (at least 20% of the group) meet case definition for acute respiratory illness within a 7-day period, OR
- 2) Facility-wide (e.g., entire school or center):**
  - At least 10% of the average daily attendance of students are absent and/or reporting symptoms of acute respiratory illness, with a minimum of 5\* ill, within a 3-day period.

*\*In settings with groups smaller than 15 people, the minimum is reduced to 3 cases.*

All site-associated COVID-19 and/or ARI clusters must be reported through the secure web application, Shared Portal for Outbreak Tracking (SPOT): [spot.cdph.ca.gov](https://spot.cdph.ca.gov).

LAC DPH will determine if the criteria for an ARI outbreak have been met and provide guidance accordingly. In outbreak settings, LAC DPH may implement temporary strategies that are more protective than these guidelines to prevent further spread of COVID-19 at the site. Sites may be required to report suspected outbreaks to other agencies. Reporting to LAC DPH does not eliminate these additional reporting requirements.

For additional information about ARI and COVID-19 reporting, visit [publichealth.lacounty.gov/covidreporting](https://publichealth.lacounty.gov/covidreporting) or contact [communityoutbreak@ph.lacounty.gov](mailto:communityoutbreak@ph.lacounty.gov). Information about reporting clusters of other communicable diseases can be found at [publichealth.lacounty.gov/acd/schools](https://publichealth.lacounty.gov/acd/schools).

## Special Considerations

### Youth Sports and Extracurricular Activities

Physical exertion and activities with increased or more forceful breathing, such as contact sports, singing, playing wind instruments, dancing, or enunciating during theatrical rehearsal and performances, will increase the risk of viral transmission, especially indoors and when community transmission is elevated. Improving ventilation and ensuring participants are encouraged to stay home when sick are important strategies to reduce transmission. Schools and programs may consider temporarily stopping these activities to control a school- or program-associated outbreak, or during periods of high COVID-19 hospital admission levels.

### Early Care and Education (ECE)

During times when masking is recommended, consider layered prevention strategies for young children who may have difficulty wearing a well-fitting mask consistently and correctly. These include encouraging vaccination among staff and children, improving ventilation, and avoiding crowded spaces.

### Students with Disabilities or Underlying Medical Conditions

In a classroom with predominantly high-risk children, schools may want to consider implementing stricter isolation requirements. This could include a 5-day exclusion period for COVID-19 positive staff and students, requiring a negative test to return before day 10, and/or temporarily re-assigning staff with regular contact with high-risk students.

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Schools with students at risk for getting very sick with COVID-19 should make reasonable accommodations when necessary to ensure that all students, including [those with disabilities and underlying medical conditions](#), are able to access in-person learning (e.g., screening testing or masking in certain settings to protect students with immunocompromising conditions). Students with conditions or disabilities that increase their risk for getting very sick with COVID-19 should not be placed into separate classrooms or otherwise segregated from other students. Camps for children with immunocompromising conditions or serious illnesses should layer multiple [preventive actions](#) as recommended by the CDC especially during respiratory virus season or periods of high transmission.

Additionally, students of all ages with disabilities and underlying medical conditions have unique challenges in accessing their classes, using support tools, and finding the resources they need to stay engaged while being at higher risk for severe disease from respiratory illnesses than their peers. Educational programs should consider implementing broad-based supports and flexibility that are responsive to their needs both at home and in class. See the US Department of [Education website](#) for further details on requirements to provide access to education for those students as well as resources.

### **K-12 Residential Dorms and Overnight Child Care**

LAC DPH recommends following the same COVID-19 guidelines for these congregate settings as for the general population. Refer to the [LA County COVID-19 Response Plan](#) for prevention strategies to implement based on local COVID-19 hospital admission levels.

In specific circumstances where the student population may be at higher risk for severe illness, facilities may opt to implement stricter guidelines during high hospital admission levels. Schools and ECE programs should balance the potential benefits of following that guidance with the impact these actions would have on student well-being, such as the ability to participate in in-person instruction, food service access, and social interactions.

### **Institutes of Higher Education (IHE)**

Each IHE should have a COVID-19 prevention plan that addresses the need to provide housing for COVID-19 cases among students who reside on campus. For information about international vaccines, see current [CDC recommendations](#). College sports teams should follow the most recent [NCAA COVID-19 guidelines](#).

### **Mental Health Support and Resources**

Beyond getting sick with COVID-19, many children's and adolescents' social, emotional, and mental well-being has been impacted by the pandemic, which may have long-term consequences across their lifespan. Visit [CDC's COVID-19 Parental Resources Kit](#) for resources by age group and the LA County Department of Public Health's [Mental Health Toolkit for Parents and Guardians of Teens](#).