

Return to In-Person Learning January 2022

Why isn't public health letting me know if there is a positive case in my student's class?

The limited transmission of COVID-19 in schools is evidence that public health measures work. Exposures that occur ONLY in schools are now typically considered low-risk due to public health precautions in place, such as screening, masking, physical distancing and handwashing.

With the transmissibility of the Omicron variant, and the prevalence of COVID-19 cases in the community, it is not possible to completely eliminate the risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools. Since students and education staff are no longer eligible for PCR tests, anyone who tests positive on a rapid antigen test or does not pass the screening tool is considered to have COVID-19. With the transmissibility of the Omicron variant, it is not feasible or appropriate to dismiss cohorts in response to every absence related to symptoms. As per provincial direction, public health is no longer reporting positive cases, and will not be dismissing cohorts in response to symptomatic individuals or confirmed positive cases.

Individuals who receive positive rapid antigen tests, or are presumed positive due to their symptoms should notify their high-risk contacts (social, household, workplace) on their own, but are not required to notify their/their child's school. More information can be found at Ontario.ca/exposed or hpePublicHealth.ca.

Why do I need to confirm that screening has been completed each day? My student seems to be feeling fine.

Screening is more important than ever, to ensure students with symptoms of COVID-19 are not at school when they are most contagious. Schools are required by the Ministry of Education to confirm that each student has completed screening each day. Parents/guardians are required to proactively screen their child specifically about COVID-19 symptoms each day before they go to school. If they do not pass screening or feel ill, they should not go to school. Teachers will ask students to confirm they passed COVID-19 screening each morning.

As cohorts will not be dismissed in response to classmates receiving positive rapid antigen test results, or being absent due to COVID-19 symptoms, ensuring symptomatic students do not attend school when most contagious is a critical step to prevent the spread of (any) respiratory illness within school.

What happens if a parent/caregiver forgets to screen their child?

Schools are required by the Ministry of Education to confirm that each student has completed screening each day, for the reasons mentioned above. We understand – life happens and parents/guardians are busy! If a student indicates that screening has not been completed, or is not sure if screening has been completed, they will be required to leave the class while a school staff member completes the screening with them. If they do not pass screening a parent/caregiver will be contacted and asked to pick up the student and take them home.

If a student indicates they are not feeling well during the school day, the school will complete the same process, to determine if your the student’s symptoms might be related to COVID-19.

My student has symptoms, so they are staying home. When can they return to school?

If a student does not pass the school screener, they are permitted to return to school once they have completed their isolation period, as long as their symptoms have been improving for 24 hours (48 hours for gastrointestinal symptoms).

If a student has ONE of the Other Symptoms, they can return to school after the symptom has been improving for at least 24 hours (48 hours for nausea, vomiting, diarrhea).

For students with One or the Most Common Symptoms or Two or more of the Other Symptoms, see below or [Ontario.ca/exposed](https://ontario.ca/exposed) for isolation times.

If the symptomatic individual is:	Then, the isolation period is:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fully vaccinated and/or under the age of 12 years 	5 days after the date symptoms started or the positive test result (whichever is earlier)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12+ years of age and not fully vaccinated Immunocompromised Hospitalized for COVID-19 related illness 	10 days after the date symptoms started or the positive test result (whichever is earlier)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Severely ill (requiring ICU level of care) Severely immunocompromised 	20 days after the date symptoms started or the positive test result (whichever is earlier)

If the symptomatic individual receives two negative rapid antigen tests (RAT), separated by 24-48 hours, they are less likely to have a COVID-19 infection and may return to school ONLY if their symptoms have been improving for at least 24 hours (or 48 hours if gastrointestinal symptoms are present).

Why are children with symptoms attending school?

We know it can be worrisome for students, families, and school staff if students return to school with lingering symptoms. However, it is not unusual for minor respiratory symptoms (lingering cough, stuffy nose, etc.) to linger for some time after the peak of an illness.

Students are permitted to return to school:

- as long as they have completed their isolation period (as outlined above)
- OR have received two negative RAT separated by 24-48 hours

- AND their symptoms have been improving for at least 24 hours (48 hours for gastro-intestinal symptoms).

Students with only ONE of the following other symptoms of COVID-19, MUST still stay home for at least 24 hours (48 hours for gastrointestinal symptoms), after which they can return to school as long as their symptom is improving AND they have not developed any more symptoms:

- runny nose/nasal congestion
- headache
- extreme fatigue
- sore throat
- muscle aches/joint pain
- nausea, vomiting and/or diarrhea

My student has ONE of the less common symptoms listed above, so they need to stay home for 24 hours (48 hours for gastrointestinal symptoms). Do their siblings/household members need to isolate as well?

As indicated on the COVID-19 school/childcare screening tool, if an individual has only ONE of the symptoms listed above, they must stay home for at least 24 hours (48 hours for gastrointestinal symptoms) AND until they are feeling better. Household members do not need to stay home in this situation - unless they also develop symptoms.

However, if a student screens positive for COVID-19 symptoms (one of the most common symptoms, or 2 or more of the other symptoms), then all household members must stay home and isolate - for the same period as the person who is symptomatic.

My student has one of the most common symptoms of COVID-19 so the whole household has been isolating. The student is now feeling better, and their isolation period has been completed, but their siblings now have symptoms. Does everyone need to stay home until all household members are feeling better?

All household members must isolate for the same time period as the person who first developed symptoms. If other household members develop symptoms, those individuals must extend their isolation period for 5 days (10 days if 12+ and unvaccinated) from the date their symptoms started. However, once a symptomatic person has completed their isolation period and is feeling better, they no longer need to isolate.

My student received a positive Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) result. What should I do?

If your student is not already isolating because of their symptoms, they (along with everyone else in their household) should isolate right away.

Since contact tracing by public health is no longer available for the general public, anyone who has tested positive on a PCR, rapid molecular, or RAT, or who is presumed to be positive based on their symptoms, should notify their own high-risk contacts of their exposure. This means the student's family should inform people outside of the school setting who have had close contact with the student. Close contacts may need to isolate depending on their age or vaccination status. More information is available at [Ontario.ca/exposed](https://ontario.ca/exposed).

As explained above, exposures in schools are considered low risk, therefore school families do not need to notify the school or classmates of the positive test result. If a student has had high-risk contact with a classmate outside of school, they can notify these contacts directly.

I heard from a friend that someone in my student's class received a positive RAT result. What should I do?

If you hear about symptomatic students or positive cases in your student's classroom, no special action is required. Individuals who are exposed only in schools are not generally considered high-risk contacts due to the health and safety measures already in place. As a result, no action is required by other members of a class cohort, other than regular symptom monitoring. Please continue to screen your student daily for symptoms as you would usually do. As long as they continue to pass the screening tool and/or have not otherwise been advised to isolate, they can continue going to school.

If I am not informed when someone in my student's class has COVID-19, how can I know schools are safe?

Several public health precautions are in place at schools to limit the spread of illnesses, such as COVID-19, influenza and more. With the transmissibility of the Omicron variant, and the prevalence of COVID-19 cases in the community, it is not possible to completely eliminate the risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools. It is important to remember that protocols have been in place for many years to identify and respond to infectious disease outbreaks in schools and we are gradually shifting towards these approaches.

Public health is moving away from monitoring individual cases, and transitioning to monitoring through a population level approach. Schools, in partnership with public health, will monitor illness-related absences, and if absences exceed 30%, they will work together to investigate the cause and take any necessary action.

We recognize that this shift away from individual reporting, to monitoring of school absences is a change from the approach used previously. In-person learning remains the best choice for healthy child development. **The many health benefits of children remaining in schools outweigh the potential risks.**

Public health precautions are in place at school, but students take their masks off to eat lunch, drink water, etc. Is this safe?

In accordance with current provincial guidance, students are required to remain in their cohorts and stay physically distanced when removing their mask to eat lunch. These precautions help reduce the risk of potential transmission when masks are removed. Chatting with one another during lunch time is an important part of a child's school day, and should be encouraged – while maintaining physical distance.

I understand that reporting/cohort dismissals are no longer possible or necessary, but I am still nervous. How can I stay safe?

The best way to keep schools, and students, safe is to limit transmission in the community. Over the past two years, we have learned the importance and benefits of:

- screening,
- masking,
- maintaining physical distance,
- limiting our number of contacts,
- staying home when symptomatic, and
- getting vaccinated.

Keep it up! As we progress through the pandemic, these proven measures will help keep schools, students, education staff, and their families as safe as possible.

Is there anything else I can do to reduce the risk for my student and my family?

Vaccination remains everyone's best defence against the COVID-19 virus. While individuals aged 5 to 19 appear to be at lower risk of severe disease from Omicron compared to other ages, this risk can be even further reduced through immunization. High vaccination rates also help keep school communities safe. In particular, increasing rates of vaccination among students offer important protection for students aged 4 and under, who are not yet eligible for vaccination.

You can help. If you are an educator, protect yourself by getting vaccinated as soon as possible. If you are a parent/guardian, make a choice to offer your child the best protection possible against COVID-19. Appointments are available locally, with many accepting walk-in appointments. Visit hpePublicHealth.ca/vaccine-booking for dates and locations.

I have a question that was not answered here. Where can I find more information?

Find updated information at hpepublichealth.ca/back-to-school-planning-parents/ or at Ontario.ca/exposed.