

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

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 Los Angeles County by detailing preventive strategies and actions to reduce the risk of spread within these settings. They apply to Early Care and Education (ECE) sites, TK-12 schools, youth programs, and Institutes of Higher Education (IHE).

The terms “site” or “school” encompass all facility types; “student” refers to all participants; and “staff” includes all working individuals at the site.

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](#).
- 3) *Required:* Report clusters of cases as outlined in the [Reporting](#) section below. Cluster reporting is done online at 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. 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

Acute Respiratory Illness (ARI) includes conditions triggered by various pathogens, such as COVID-19, influenza (flu), and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), among many others. ARI symptoms include 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 good hygiene, improve air quality, support sick leave, 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 for schools, see [LAC DPH \(ACDC\) Schools Toolkit](#), [CDPH Safe Schools Hub](#) and [CDC’s Preventing Spread of Infections in K-12 Schools](#).

Schools must 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.

Responding to Respiratory Virus Transmission in Education Settings

To support safe, in-person learning in relationship to disease spread, schools must have policies to identify and manage communicable disease exposures. State laws require excluding anyone with a communicable disease that poses a risk to others.¹

¹ [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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Staff and students with symptoms

If you have symptoms of acute respiratory infection:

- Wear a mask, stay home and away from others, talk with your healthcare provider about treatment options, and test for COVID-19. Consider testing for flu in addition to COVID-19 if you are at high risk of severe illness. Testing is a prevention strategy that can assist in making decisions to further protect yourself and others.
- If you test negative for COVID-19, stay home and away from others until fever-free for 24 hours without medication and your symptoms improve. If you test positive for COVID-19, see safety measures in the next section.
- When returning to normal activities, take added precaution such as practicing good hygiene, taking additional steps to improve ventilation, and wearing a mask when around others. This is especially important to protect people at [higher risk of getting very sick](#) from respiratory viruses.
- Consult the [LAC DPH Symptom Guidance for Schools](#) for symptom-specific recommendations.

COVID-19 Specific Guidelines

In Los Angeles County, specific [instructions for people who test positive for COVID-19 \(Cases\) and their Close Contacts](#) must be followed. Schools can refer to the summarized LA County COVID-19 Guidelines below to develop their policies.

Staff and students with COVID-19 (Cases)

Staff and students with a COVID-19 infection must follow to these instructions regardless of their vaccination status, history of previous infection, or lack of symptoms:

1. Stay home and away from others.

- COVID-19 is highly contagious virus that spreads rapidly, especially when an infected individual feels sick.
- If symptomatic or feverish, stay home until:
 - Fever-free for 24 hours without medication, and
 - Other symptoms are mild or improving.
- Asymptomatic individuals must wear a high-quality mask for 10 days after testing positive if they remain on campus.
- Masks are required around others for 10 days after a positive test or symptom onset. Early return is allowed only with consistent mask use.
- It's recommended to test before returning and to continue staying home if positive until day 10.
- Schools may enforce stricter policies, especially in high-risk settings.

2. Wear a mask.

- Masks can help reduce the spread of illness and protect people with increased risk of severe illness from respiratory viruses.
- Wear a well-fitting, high-quality mask for 10 days from symptom onset or first positive test.
- Masks can be removed sooner if an individual tests negative twice, 24 hours apart.

3. Tell close contacts.

- Inform close contacts so they can take protective measures.

Additional Considerations

- If symptoms return or worsen, it may indicate [COVID-19 rebound](#). Stay home, retest with an antigen test, and talk to your doctor.

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- Support students who are learning at home due to illness. Ensure that employees are not penalized when they stay home when sick.

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.
- **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.

Exposed staff and students should:

1. Wear a mask.

- Wear a well-fitting mask around others for 10 days after last exposure to prevent asymptomatic spread.

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.**

- Watch out for symptoms for 10 days after last exposure. If symptoms develop, stay home away from others and test immediately.

3. Get tested.

- Test within 3-5 days after last exposure. If recently recovered from COVID-19 in the last 90 days, review [testing recommendations](#).
- Employers are required to follow guidance in [Cal/OSHA COVID-19 Prevention Non-Emergency Regulations](#). This includes ensuring that exposed staff have access to COVID-19 testing available at no cost during paid time in a manner that ensures confidentiality.

Communication and notifications about COVID-19 exposures

Clear and timely communication is crucial to prevent further spread of the virus and ensure everyone's safety. Parents should immediately inform the site when a student tests positive for COVID-19 and was on site while infectious. When notified of a COVID-19 exposure on site, sites are recommended to promptly notify students who were exposed and provide them with instruction for close contacts (above). If an individual with COVID-19 participated in any site-related activities while symptomatic, the CD liaison should 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](#).

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.



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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 exposed 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.

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 or contact communityoutbreak@ph.lacounty.gov. Information about reporting clusters of other communicable diseases can be found at 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.

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 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.

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

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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. In specific circumstances where the student population may be at higher risk for severe illness, facilities may opt to implement stricter guidelines during times of increased community transmission. 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](#).

Emergency Preparedness Planning & Maintaining School Operational Status

Schools should prepare for future infectious disease outbreaks by including an infectious disease section in their emergency operations plan. This will enable rapid implementation of public health measures and minimize disruptions. For resources, visit the [Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center](#).

