**Public Health Update to Schools - Frequently Asked Questions**

**4th February 2021**

**LFD Testing**

1. **Why is the guidance now saying it is OK to test via LFT within 90 days of a positive PCR test result?**

Guidance has been in place for some time advising that you should not re-test via **PCR** within 90 days of a positive PCR test result unless you develop new symptoms (because you are likely to have developed immunity to the virus and the test is so sensitive it may detect dead viral cells and give a positive test result, when you are in fact no longer infectious to others).

Evidence now shows that LFD tests are less sensitive than PCR tests (PCR tests amplify genetic material, LFT tests don’t), therefore an LFT is less likely to detect dead viral cells. So, if you test positive via LFD within 90 days of a positive PCR, it is a good indicator of ‘high viral load’, meaning you are more likely to be infectious to other people. This is why the national guidance for LFD testing includes the following advice:

***If someone has recently (within 90 days) tested positive for COVID-19, they are likely to have developed some immunity. However, given the current prevalence of the virus and the pressing need to reduce transmission, subjects are encouraged to take an LFD test regardless of whether they have tested positive previously as this is a good indicator of high viral load, and therefore infectiousness.***

**This difference in LFD and PCR testing within 90 days of a positive PCR test result has now been clearly evidenced and national guidance is consistently advising that LFD testing can take place within 90 days of a positive PCR test result. Cumbria County Council’s Public Health Team is therefore happy to advise LFD testing can take place within 90 days of a positive PCR.**

* Do **not** LFD test during a 10-day isolation period.
* Please ensure that any member of staff or pupil participating in LFD testing **(as part of a supervised programme i.e. secondaries and FE colleges)** within 90 days of a positive PCR result is made aware that if the result comes back positive, they will need to isolate along with their household for 10 days (with day ‘one’ counted as the day following the positive LFT).
* Please ensure that any member of staff carrying out LFD testing **(as part of a non-supervised programme i.e. primaries and nurseries)** within 90 days of a positive PCR result is made aware that if the result comes back positive, they will need to isolate along with their household and undergo a confirmatory PCR test as soon as possible. If the PCR result is negative, they can end the isolation. If the PCR is positive, the individual and their household will need to complete the full 10-day isolation period (with day ‘one’ counted as the day following the positive LFT).
* *Why is confirmatory PCR needed for Primary School and nursery staff, but not those being tested in secondaries and FE colleges?* Because primary school and nursery staff carry out their testing at home unsupervised, so the test result needs to be validated. Secondary school/FE college staff and pupils carry out their testing as part of an onsite supervised programme, so the result is verified by a third party at the time of the test.
* If an individual chooses not to be re-tested within the 90 days following their positive PCR result, they are still able to come back to the setting at the end of their 10 day isolation period as long as they feel well enough to do so and have not had a high temperature for 48 hours. Participation in LFD testing is not mandatory. A school cannot insist an individual has a negative test result before they return.
* LFD testing is for asymptomatic use. If an individual develops symptoms within 90 days of a positive PCR test result, they should isolate along with their household and get a PCR test as soon as possible.
1. **Should we report positive LFT results to the Cumbria County Council COVID-19 call centre?**

YES! This triggers the support that schools receive from the public health team. The call centre team have been briefed and are aware that you may call through a positive LFT result. Our track and trace system has also been updated to be able to record LFT and/or PCR results for the same person. The call centre can be contacted on 0800 783 1968.

1. **Can I still participate in LFD testing if I have had one or both doses of COVID-19 vaccine?**

Yes, you are encouraged to still participate in LFD testing if you have had the vaccine. This is because research is ongoing to assess whether or not having the vaccine stops you being infectious to others (or if it just protects the person receiving the vaccine). Therefore, whilst there may be a risk to you infecting others, you are encouraged to participate in LFD testing and continue to follow advice such as ‘Hands, Face, Space’.

If you develop symptoms at any point after having the vaccine, isolate along with your household and get a PCR test. The vaccine will not influence the test result.

**Isolation Period**

1. **I’ve heard that the isolation period is going to be changed again from 10 to 14 days – is this correct?**

We are not aware of any plans to extend the isolation period from 10 to 14 days. If any policy changes to occur, we will let you know immediately.

**Variants of COVID-19**

1. **We are concerned about reports from other areas of England regarding new variants of the virus. Is there a problem is Cumbria and should education settings be doing anything different?**

These are the variants that are currently causing concern in the UK:

* **UK variant** – this emerged in September and is more transmissible than previous variants. This is now the dominant strain circulating in the UK, including Cumbria. It is the driver for the current lockdown.
* **South Africa variant** – which has been found in 20 other countries, including the UK. Not known to be circulating in Cumbria, but mass testing is currently underway in 8 areas of the country where clusters have been identified: Hertfordshire, Surrey, Kent, Walsall, Sefton and the London boroughs of Merton, Haringey and Ealing
* **A variant from Brazil** – No clusters currently identified in the UK

The South African and Brazil variants have a mutation called E484K, that may help the virus evade parts of the immune system (antibodies). The UK variant has also recently been found to have mutated in the same way and cases have been identified in Liverpool and Bristol, where mass testing is now also being rolled out.

Whilst clusters of the South Africa variant and the mutated UK variant have not been identified in Cumbria to date, we are currently preparing for this to happen in the future. This includes planning for mass testing via routes such as door-to-door delivery and collection of swab kits.

Education settings do not need to do anything differently at the moment. All variants of COVID-19 are transmitted from person-to-person via the same route, so continue to implement your COVID-safe policies and risk assessments. Promote ‘Hands, Face, Space’ wherever possible, support LFT testing where available and ensure anyone with symptoms of COVID-19 isolate and get tested.

Any queries, please contact the Cumbria County Council Public Health Team by emailing EducationIPC@cumbria.gov.uk

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