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# Provider Alert: Washington State updates COVID-19 isolation guidance

Date: March 26, 2024

This is a Provider Alert from the Washington State Department of Health (DOH). DOH has released [updated COVID-19 isolation guidance](#) describing what people should do if they have respiratory virus symptoms or if they test positive for COVID-19 or another respiratory virus, such as influenza or RSV. While much of DOH's guidance is similar to [updates recently announced by the CDC](#), DOH's new guidance offers firmer recommendations on how to handle returning to normal activities after infection than CDC, as well as more guidance on how to avoid infecting people who are at higher risk for severe illness.

## Actions Requested

- Follow facility practices/guidelines for testing and evaluating patients for respiratory viruses; continue to test patients with compatible symptoms for COVID-19.
- If an eligible patient tests positive for COVID-19, continue to offer antiviral treatment if indicated to reduce the risk of severe disease.
- When evaluating or educating patients who are living in the community and have respiratory virus symptoms or test positive for a respiratory virus, please advise them to:
  - Stay home and away from others until the following have been true for **24 hours**:
    - Their symptoms are improving AND
    - They have not had a fever (without using fever-reducing medication).
  - Advise patients they could still spread illness even if symptoms have improved; advise them to wear a mask and take other additional precautions to prevent spreading the disease to others for 5 days after they return to activities.
  - Advise patients with COVID-19 to consider taking additional steps to protect others at high risk of severe disease for 10 days after their illness began OR until they test negative for COVID-19 with an antigen test, such as staying away from people at high risk of severe disease or wearing a mask around them.
- People in healthcare settings, including healthcare workers, should continue to follow CDC guidance on [COVID-19 Infection Prevention in Health Care Settings](#).

## Summary of updated guidance

One of the most significant guidance changes is how long someone should stay home and away from others after contracting COVID-19. While previous COVID-19 guidance recommended people isolate for at least 5 full days after symptoms appeared, the new guidance recommends that people who have COVID-19 or another respiratory virus may return to normal activities when **both** of the following have been true for at least 24 hours: their symptoms are getting better overall, and they have not had a fever (without using fever-reducing medication).

Because people can remain contagious even after they feel better, DOH recommends [wearing a mask](#) and taking other extra precautions during the first 5 days of returning to normal activities, such as taking steps to improve [air flow and filtration](#), frequent [hand washing](#), [regular cleaning](#), [physical distancing](#), and, if possible, [testing](#) when they will be around other people indoors.

People with COVID-19 can protect people at high risk of severe disease by staying away from them for 10 days after their illness begins or until they test negative for COVID-19 with an antigen test. If someone with COVID-19 needs to be around someone at high risk of getting very sick during this time, the most protective step they can take is wearing a well-fitting [mask](#) when around the person at high risk of severe disease.

While DOH's new COVID-19 and respiratory illness guidance is meant to provide baseline recommendations, Washington residents are asked to follow any local health jurisdiction, workplace, business, or school policies that may provide more protective guidance specific to their setting or community. People who live or work in a homeless shelter or correctional facility should follow [DOH guidance](#) specific to those settings. Employers must follow Washington State Department of Labor & Industries (L&I) COVID-19 requirements in the workplace: [L&I Requirements and Guidance for Preventing COVID-19](#).

**This guidance does not apply to health care settings but may be followed by residential care settings except when health care services are being provided.** People who are working, staying, or visiting in health care settings, including long-term care settings, should follow the guidance in [COVID-19 Infection Prevention in Health Care Settings](#). Flu guidance for health care settings, including skilled nursing facilities can be found on the CDC's [Prevention Strategies for Seasonal Influenza in Healthcare Settings](#) webpage. Long-term care settings include skilled nursing facilities and residential care settings such as adult family homes, assisted living facilities, supported living, and enhanced services facilities.

DOH encourages residential care settings (such as adult family homes, assisted living facilities, supported living, and enhanced services facilities) to follow the [DOH guidance for what to do if someone has COVID-19 or another respiratory virus](#); DOH's guidance encompasses the [CDC community guidance](#) that residential care settings follow, as well as providing some additional protections. Healthcare workers who enter these settings to provide healthcare should follow [CDC healthcare guidance](#).

## Resources

- DOH guidance: [What To Do When You Are Sick With COVID-19 or Another Respiratory Virus](#)
- DOH COVID-19 healthcare setting webpage: [COVID-19 Infection Prevention in Health Care Settings](#)
- DOH news release: [Department of Health announces updated guidance for COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses](#)

If you have any questions, please contact your [local health jurisdiction](#).