What to do after employees who have COVID-19 have been in the workplace

Why am I receiving this communication?
El Paso County Public Health has identified a staff member who has worked in your facility that has tested positive for COVID-19. Public Health is requesting that you determine if any other employees have symptoms of COVID-19 and ask them to isolate for at least 10 days from the start of their symptoms. Employees who have been in close contact (see definition below) with ill staff members should be quarantined for 14 days. Allowing staff who have been exposed to remain at home during this time will help prevent additional cases that would classify your facility as an outbreak.

Recommendations and guidance to share with employees who are diagnosed with COVID-19 or employees identified as a close contact:

Isolation
- Isolation is separating individuals who are sick with COVID-19 from individuals who are not sick.
- A person should isolate if:
  - They test positive for COVID-19 by PCR (nose swab). This is known as a confirmed case.
  - They test positive with an antigen test or they are suspected of having COVID-19 based on symptoms alone. This is known as a probable case.
- Someone in isolation should stay home and away from others, including not going to work in an offsite location.

Quarantine
- Quarantine is for individuals who were in close contact with a confirmed COVID-19 case but are not showing symptoms (asymptomatic). Quarantine options are below.
  - Safest option: Remain at home and away from others for a full 14 days. If individuals stay completely separate from others for 14 days after exposure, they do not put anyone at risk for catching COVID-19 from them. People who live in group settings like dorms, barracks, or homeless shelters must use this option. People who work with high-risk people, like those in nursing homes, should also follow a 14-day quarantine and contact their occupational health representative for further information.
  - Safe option: If individuals remain symptom-free for 10 days after exposure and don’t live in a group setting, it’s permissible to end their quarantine and continue to monitor themselves for symptoms for the remaining 4 days of the incubation period. CDC recently released data showing that there is a lower risk of becoming ill and passing on the virus at 11 to 14 days after exposure. While it is lower risk, there is still up to a 10% chance of passing on the virus after day 10. Individuals must not be in contact with people who are elderly or at risk for severe illness for the full 14 days.
  - Testing option: The shortest option allowable for quarantine is seven days. To use this option, individuals must obtain a negative COVID-19 test on day five to day seven after their exposure. Testing is a point-in-time measure and individuals may still become ill with the virus and pass it to others after leaving a seven-day quarantine. For these reasons, seven-day quarantine with testing is the least preferred option and not recommended by El Paso County Public Health in most cases.
- During quarantine, an individual should take their temperature once or twice a day to be sure they do not have a fever (greater than 100.4°F) and watch for symptoms of COVID-19, including fever, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, body aches, fatigue, loss of taste or smell, congestion, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. It might take
days for all symptoms to develop and some infected individuals might only have mild symptoms.

- If you are fully vaccinated, you are not required to quarantine after possible or confirmed exposure to the virus if you meet the three criteria below:
  - You must be 2 weeks from your final vaccine dose
  - You are currently within 90 days since your final dose and,
  - You are showing no symptoms

Fully vaccinated individuals should monitor themselves for symptoms for 14 days following exposure and continue to practice social distancing, avoid social groups and gatherings, and wear face masks at all times when in public places.

**Close contacts**

- Close contacts of persons with confirmed or probable COVID-19 should self-quarantine from the time of their last contact with the person.
- Anyone who is a close contact should contact their primary care provider if they begin experiencing any symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, body aches, fatigue, loss of taste or smell, congestion, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea).

**Who counts as a close contact?**

- Anyone who was within six feet of someone who has COVID-19 for at least 15 minutes (total time over each 24 hour period) in the 48 hours prior to symptom onset thru the end of their isolation period.
- Anyone who provided care at home to someone who is sick with COVID-19.
- Anyone who had direct physical contact with the sick person (touched, hugged, or kissed them).
- Anyone who shared eating or drinking utensils with the sick person.
- Anyone whom the sick person sneezed on, coughed on, or otherwise got respiratory droplets on.
Contact tracing

- Contact tracing is conducted by Public Health staff to identify individuals who might have been exposed to someone known or suspected of having COVID-19. Close contacts are at risk of getting infected themselves.
- Contact tracing is a critical tool to help to slow the spread of COVID-19 by having close contacts self-quarantine away from others.
- Individuals who are contacted by Public Health about a positive test or potential exposure to COVID-19 should be reassured that their information is kept confidential.

Repeat testing after someone tests PCR positive:

- Retesting of someone who previously tested PCR positive is not recommended for the general public.
- If your employee has been isolated or quarantined by Public Health, they can return to work after meeting the time criteria in their quarantine or isolation letter. They do not need to test negative.
- Isolation periods should begin either on the date symptoms began or on the date of a positive test if asymptomatic, as defined in this document.
- There are some settings where repeat testing might be indicated, such as long-term care facilities, health care settings, or correctional settings.
- Note that insurance might not cover the cost of repeat testing.

Return to work strategies for employees who had COVID-19:

There are three strategies used to determine when a person with COVID-19 is ready to return to work (outside of their home) after being in isolation: Symptom-based, time-based, or test-based. Public Health does not recommend a test-based strategy for clearing employees to return to work and therefore information for that strategy is not included in this guidance. The time-based strategy is advised.

The decision of which strategy is used is ultimately up to an employer, as Public Health does not provide individual clearance for return to work.

Symptom-based

For persons with COVID-19 who had symptoms and tested positive OR only had COVID-19 symptoms, isolation may end when:

- At least 10 days have passed since their symptoms first appeared, AND
- At least 24 hours since fever resolved without using fever-reducing medication, AND
- At least 24 hours of symptom improvement (any COVID-19 symptoms)

Time-based

For persons who tested positive for COVID-19 but never had symptoms, isolation may end when:

- Ten days have passed since the testing date, provided no symptoms developed since their positive test. If they developed symptoms, then the symptom-based strategy should be used.
Reporting and mitigating outbreaks

Workplaces/facilities that suspect an outbreak (knowledge of five or more employees from a non-household group with confirmed COVID-19 or COVID-like illness, of at least one with a positive PCR test or antigen test, within a 14-day period) should immediately take the following actions:

- Contact Public Health at 719-578-3220 to schedule a time to discuss further outbreak guidance and next steps. Please note, this is not meant to be a punitive action; Public Health often has access to resources and guidance that are not available elsewhere.
- Fill out the [CDPHE COVID-19 outbreak report form](https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/content/cdphe-covid-19-outbreak-report-form) to report the outbreak in accordance with Colorado law.
- Begin identifying staff with COVID-19-like symptoms using this [CDPHE COVID-19 line list template](https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/content/cdphe-covid-19-line-list).

Do not wait until you have five or more employees out sick to act. Contact Public Health as soon as you see a sudden increase in cases or severe outcomes to discuss prevention and mitigation procedures to attempt to avoid having further illness in the facility.

If five or more cases are detected within 14 days among employees, you should temporarily close, and report the outbreak immediately to Public Health. Public Health will help you confirm if an outbreak exists, identify additional cases, and determine the extent of the outbreak. Public Health will also help you develop a plan to safely reopen. By working closely with Public Health, you may be able to conduct a rapid risk assessment and implement immediate control measures instead of closing.

During an outbreak, Public Health will help you build a plan that may include the following components:

- Enhanced cleaning, disinfection, and environmental controls
- Contact tracing to identify healthy employees who may have been exposed to an ill co-worker
- Excluding vulnerable employees at higher risk for serious illness while the outbreak is ongoing
- Requiring all employees to use face masks (cloth or otherwise) while at work
- Helping clarify the best way to clear employees to return to work
- Additional workplace/facility closures may be required by Public Health if widespread transmission continues to occur, despite the above measures or if there are not enough staff available to run safely
- Additional outbreak mitigation recommendations may be made depending on specific situations

Learn more about [Preventing, Reporting and Mitigating Workplace Outbreaks](https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/content/preventing-reporting-and-mitigating-workplace-outbreaks)