

Austin Public Health Isolation & Exposure Guidance for Pre-K – 12th Grade Schools & Child Care Programs – September 21, 2022

This document contains Austin Public Health (APH) guidance for schools and child care programs in Austin and Travis County on how to apply the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention’s (CDC) [isolation](#) and [exposure](#) recommendations.

KEY TERMS

Isolation: [Isolation](#) is separating people who have COVID-19 or symptoms of COVID-19 from those who are not infected or showing symptoms. People isolate when they show symptoms of COVID-19 or are infected with the virus, even if they don’t have symptoms.

Exposure: A person may be [exposed](#) to the virus that causes COVID-19 if they come into contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19 during this time period – anytime starting two days before the person with COVID-19 developed symptoms (or two days before they tested positive for COVID-19 if they had no symptoms) through the end of the sick person’s isolation period.

Up to date: A person is [up to date](#) with their COVID-19 vaccines if they have completed a COVID-19 vaccine primary series and received the most recent booster dose recommended for them by CDC.

I. ISOLATION

A. Who needs to isolate?

People who have confirmed or suspected COVID-19, or are showing symptoms of COVID-19, need to isolate, regardless of vaccination status. More specifically,

- **People who have a [positive viral test](#) for COVID-19**, regardless of whether or not they have [symptoms](#).
- **People with [symptoms](#) of COVID-19**, including people who are awaiting test results or have not been tested.

B. How long should people isolate?

People who test positive for COVID-19 or have symptoms, regardless of vaccination status, must stay home and isolate for at least 5 days. (More details about criteria for ending isolation are provided below.) Note, this minimum 5 day isolation period is a requirement for children in schools and child care programs, per the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) [Communicable Disease Chart for Schools and Child Care Centers](#). **Regardless of when someone ends isolation, they should avoid being around people who are more likely to get very sick from COVID-19 until at least day 11.**

Counting days of isolation	
If you had no symptoms	If you had symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Day 0 is the day you were tested (not the day you received your positive test result). • Day 1 is the first full day following the day you were tested. • If you develop symptoms within 10 days of when you were tested, the clock restarts at day 0 on the day symptoms began. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Day 0 is the day symptoms began regardless of when you tested positive. • Day 1 is the first full day after the day your symptoms started.

People who have COVID-19 and have symptoms

People with COVID-19 who have symptoms may [end isolation after day 5](#) if:

- They are fever-free for 24 hours (without the use of fever-reducing medication), and
- Their symptoms are improving, and
- They can mask around others on days 6 through 10 (see box above on isolation for those who cannot mask).

People who continue to have a fever or other symptoms that have not improved after 5 days of isolation should wait to end isolation until they are fever-free for 24 hours (without the use of fever-reducing medication) and their symptoms are improving.

- People who had [moderate illness](#) (experienced shortness of breath or had difficulty breathing) due to COVID-19 need to isolate through day 10.
- People who had [severe illness](#) (were hospitalized) due to COVID-19 or have a weakened immune system need to isolate at least through day 10 and should consult their doctor before ending isolation.

People who tested positive for COVID-19 but have had no symptoms

- People with COVID-19 who did NOT have symptoms may [end isolation after day 5](#) if they can mask around others on days 6 through 10 (see box above on isolation for those who cannot mask).
- For people who develop symptoms within 10 days of when they were tested, the clock restarts at day 0 on the day symptoms began. These people should follow criteria for ending isolation for people with symptoms.

People who receive Paxlovid treatment and experience a rebound in symptoms or a new positive viral test after having tested negative

- Per [the CDC health advisory about COVID-19 rebound after Paxlovid treatment](#), people with recurrence of COVID-19 symptoms or a new positive viral test after having tested negative should restart isolation and isolate again for at least 5 days. They can end their re-isolation period after 5 full days if fever has resolved for 24 hours (without the use of fever-reducing medication) and symptoms are improving. The person should wear a mask for a total of 10 days after rebound symptoms start.

Isolation for people who cannot mask, including children under age 2

The CDC advises people with COVID-19 to isolate for at least 5 days and mask around others for a full 10 days. People who cannot mask, including children under the age of 2, need to isolate longer to avoid spreading COVID-19 to others.

People who cannot mask, should either:

- Isolate for at least 10 days, OR
- After at least 5 days of isolation, if they are fever-free and feeling better, they can return to care before day 10 once they have had two sequential negative **rapid antigen tests** 48 hours apart.* How to do this:
 - Day 6 is the earliest a person in this situation should start testing.
 - If the test result on day 6 is **positive**, they should complete a 10-day isolation. This is because they may still be infectious and will not be able to get two sequential negative tests 48 hours apart within the 10-day timeframe that would allow them to complete a shorter isolation.
 - If the test result on day 6 is **negative**, they should be retested on day 8. If the test on day 8 is also negative, the person could return to care.

* At this time, there are no at-home rapid antigen tests [authorized by the FDA for use in children younger than 2](#). Therefore, families that want to use this testing strategy for children under age 2 would need to take their children to a clinic to get tested.

Note: Because implementation of this testing strategy would likely be challenging for child care programs and schools to track and verify, APH supports any schools and child care programs that choose to only offer the 10-day isolation option for people with COVID who cannot mask.

C. How long should people with COVID-19 mask?

People with COVID-19 should wear a [well-fitting mask](#) around others at home and in public for a full 10 days, even if they end isolation earlier.

Alternatively, **after at least 5 days of isolation, if they are feeling better** (no fever without the use of fever-reducing medications and symptoms improving), people can use testing to determine if they can remove their mask earlier than 10 days. They may remove their mask before day 10 once they have had two sequential negative rapid antigen tests 48 hours apart. If their antigen test results are positive, they may still be infectious. They should continue wearing a mask and wait at least 48 hours before taking another test. They should continue taking antigen tests at least 48 hours apart until they have two sequential negative results. This may mean they need to continue wearing a mask and testing beyond day 10. The information in the blue box below details how this testing strategy would be implemented in practice.

Note: Because implementation of this testing strategy would likely be challenging for schools and child care programs to track and verify, APH supports any schools and child care programs that choose to only offer the 10-day masking option for people with COVID-19.

Examples of using testing to determine when people with COVID-19 can unmask

If the person with COVID-19 has completed at least 5 days of isolation and is feeling better (no fever without the use of fever-reducing medications and symptoms improving), they may choose to use the testing strategy to determine if they can unmask before day 10.

Day 6 is the earliest a person with COVID-19 should start testing to determine when they can remove their mask.

- If the test result on day 6 is **negative**, they may end isolation, continue to mask, and retest on day 8. If the test on day 8 is also negative, they can remove their mask.
- If the test result on day 6 is **positive**, they should continue to mask. They should also continue to isolate and retest on day 8. If the day 8 test is negative, they may end isolation. Because they have not yet had two sequential negative tests 48 hours apart, they should continue to mask and test until they obtain two sequential negative tests 48 hours apart.

II. EXPOSURE

People exposed to COVID-19 should monitor for symptoms, wear a mask if able, and get tested. Details on each of these key steps are provided below. These people should also take extra precautions if they must be around people who are more likely to get very sick from COVID-19.

Monitor for Symptoms

Exposed people should watch for symptoms for 10 days, as people can develop COVID-19 up to 10 days after they have been exposed. If symptoms develop, they should get tested immediately and isolate until they receive their test results. If they test positive, they must isolate at home and follow the isolation recommendations above.

Mask

People who have been exposed to COVID-19 should wear a [well-fitting mask](#) around others for 10 days at home and in public. They should not go places where they are unable to wear a well-fitting mask.

Masks are not recommended for children under age 2, or for people with some disabilities. Other prevention strategies should be used to avoid transmission during these 10 days, such as:

- having anyone able to mask in the classroom wear a mask (teachers, children ages 2 and up, etc.)
- increasing outdoor time
- improving ventilation
- adding some physical distance during naps, meals, and snacks
- encouraging everyone eligible to stay up to date on COVID-19 vaccines and boosters

Counting days after a COVID-19 exposure

- Start counting from Day 1.
- **Day 0 is the day of last exposure** to someone with COVID-19.
- **Day 1 is the first full day** after last exposure.

Test

People who are exposed should get tested on day 6 after exposure, even if symptoms don't develop. If the person has had COVID-19 within the past 90 days, see these [specific testing recommendations](#). If they test positive, they must isolate at home and follow isolation recommendations above.

Child care programs can refer to the "Flow Charts with Guidance on Return to School for Individuals Given a PCR or Rapid Antigen Test" posted at [APH COVID-19 web page for child care providers](#) for details on when people can return to school after testing.