

COVID-19 Q & A Schools



Q: Why bother with masks and social distancing if everyone in a room, on a bus, or other indoor space for a few minutes with a positive case is going to be quarantined anyway?

A: We understand that it can be frustrating for the school community (administration, staff, parents, and students) to implement and follow all of the guidelines for COVID-19, only to discover that the health department will quarantine everyone that has been around the positive case anyway, despite mask wearing and being greater than 6 feet from the case.

Close contacts of a positive case are usually easier to identify as being exposed than proximate contacts. Close contacts are those that have been within six feet of someone who has tested positive for COVID-19.

Proximate contacts are defined as being in the same enclosed environment such as a classroom, office, or gathering, but greater than 6 feet from a person who has tested positive for COVID-19.

In each unique circumstance, we take all available information into consideration. This includes cumulative (or repeat) exposures, the size of the space, the type of activity occurring within the space, and more.

Given the school setting, and the impact of a long term cluster event to health and education, we err on the side of caution when cases arise. If we can quickly and carefully separate and remove exposed individuals from the in-person learning environment, we can hopefully prevent both a “slow-burn” scenario, where singular cases pop up in succession **and** an “outbreak” scenario, where a bunch of students and or staff are infected all in a short time frame. Both scenarios are extremely disruptive to schools and families.

Q: If students are excluded from going to school because they are a contact of a positive, why do they also have to be under a quarantine order from the health department?

A: This question comes up a lot. Businesses, with the best of intentions, will perform their own “contact tracing” and send employees home to “quarantine” when they learn of a case in their workforce. The assumption is that once a person is sent home from work or school for 14 days, they are no longer a concern. It is important to note however, that the health department is the only entity that can issue a health order of isolation or quarantine. Our job is to reduce the likelihood of transmission not only within schools and worksites, but to the greater community – outside of the work or school setting. We want to ensure that exposed people are remaining at home, separate from other household members during the viral incubation period – not going to stores, restaurants, sporting events, religious services, family gatherings, or other public places that may put others at risk.

Q: What does it mean to quarantine?

A: QUARANTINE keeps someone who was in close contact with COVID-19 positive person away from others. Those on quarantine are asked to remain home, where the health department will monitor them daily for the duration of their quarantine period for any developing symptoms. We recommend that

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those quarantined avoid contact with other household members as much as possible. Visitors, including family members who are not living in the household are not allowed in the home for the duration of the quarantine period.

If a quarantined individual develops symptoms and tests positive for COVID-19, their circle of potential contacts is much smaller since they were removed from community.

The positive case at Crown Point Central School and the Lee House cluster provide examples of how well isolation and quarantine work. Only one case of COVID-19 was ever reported at the Crown Point school, even though there were numerous potential contacts. Three Lee House residents were reported as the first cases of that cluster. The health department worked quickly to isolate these cases and quarantine all of their contacts after investigation and contact tracing. While several additional individuals associated with the Lee House tested positive for COVID-19 in the days following, almost all of the subsequent positives were in people who were under a quarantine already (from the initial cluster of 3 cases). This greatly reduced the amount of additional quarantines because those folks had limited contact with others AND it effectively prevented the spread of COVID-19 to others within the apartment building and to outside community members. These are success stories in terms of preventing a larger outbreak, still, we want to remind the community that these COVID infections still came at a significant cost. Some of the illnesses resulted in hospitalizations and residents experienced significant disruption to their daily lives due to the quarantines and visitation restrictions.

Q: How is quarantining different from isolation?

A: ISOLATION keeps someone who is sick with COVID-19 (or who has tested positive for COVID-19 without symptoms) away from others, even in their own home. Individuals who are positive for COVID-19 have to meet specific criteria to be released from isolation. Only the health department can determine when someone who is under a health order of quarantine or isolation can be released.

Q: What if someone in my household requires personal services within the home and we have a member of the family on isolation or quarantine?

A: Essex County Health Department will work with you to develop a plan to safely continue any personal home health aide services or clinical care that are required.

Q: My child was issued an Order of Quarantine. What does that mean for the rest of our household?

A: The only person subject to a quarantine is the person identified as the contact of the positive case. Other household members are not on quarantine because (as far as we know) they have NOT been exposed to the **person who is sick**. We isolate sick people (and people who test positive even if they don't have symptoms) and quarantine **their** contacts. We don't widen the circle to include contacts of contacts. If the quarantined individual develops symptoms and/or tests positive, we would begin the process anew – isolating the now sick person and quarantining all of their contacts. As noted above, this new circle should be much smaller since the new case was already limiting contact with others being

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that they were quarantined. Check with your workplace, school, or other destination to see if you need to stay home because a member of your household is under quarantine. Employers should be screening staff daily, and some ask this question.

Q: The isolation and quarantine requirements are very difficult for my family. Are there any guidelines or resources for how to better prepare?

A: Isolation and or quarantine can be very stressful for people, especially younger children and older adults. Having a plan for illness can help reduce stress and the emotional toll of the unknown. Tips and resources are available:

Click the **Prepare** tab at: <https://coronavirus.health.ny.gov/protect-yourself-and-your-family-coronavirus-covid-19>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/checklist-household-ready.html>

Talking with families of quarantined household members, including children, we have learned the following tips:

- 1) Double-check with schools and workplaces to confirm your contact information is up-to-date. We need to call parents and others quickly in the case of any exposure, so please be sure your voicemail is set up, and return any calls as soon as possible.
- 2) Talk with your kids and other household members about quarantine before it happens, so that they can understand it's something to prepare calmly for, like any other form of safety measures your family practices. These practical skills will serve them in the future as well.
- 3) Have a working thermometer, disinfectant cleaning products, and paper towels on hand.
- 4) Keep a calendar so that you are able to identify your activities over the past 2 weeks. This will help our contact tracing efforts move quickly.
- 5) A network of social support is important: friends, family, community members play a key role in helping families get through the quarantine process.
- 6) If you are not contacted by our team, but think you or your child has been in close contact with a positive person, please give us a call.
- 7) Please respect the privacy of our community members. Medical information is confidential. Speculation on social media and other means of gossip can result in bullying and other painful impacts.

Q: What if I've already been spending time, in close contact, with someone who is now under Isolation or Quarantine?

A: Do the best you can to limit additional contact with the isolated or quarantined household members. Even if you think you've already been exposed, it's never too late to protect the health of other household members. Think through sleeping, eating, and other contact scenarios. We know that people

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are more likely to become infected with COVID-19 the more times they are exposed. So, limiting contact from any point forward will help prevent you from becoming sick.