

Returning to School During COVID-19: Frequently Asked Questions

COVID-19 symptoms and illness at school

What happens if someone comes to school with symptoms of COVID-19?

Parents/guardians are required to assess students daily for symptoms of COVID-19 before the start of the school day using the daily screening questionnaire (checklist), available here:

<https://www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/edc-covid-19-screening-questionnaire-english.pdf>

Anyone who is experiencing symptoms cannot enter a school.

What if a student or school staff member has symptoms that can be explained by a pre-existing medical condition, like allergies? Can they still go to school?

Prior to school re-entry, it was recommended that a student who has allergies (or other pre-existing medical conditions that cause similar symptoms similar to COVID-19) get at least one negative COVID-19 test result before the start of the school year.

Allergy symptoms (and similar) would be considered part of the students' baseline health status. As long as these symptoms do not change, the student can continue to attend school.

What happens if someone develops COVID-19 symptoms while they are at school?

The symptomatic person must be masked and isolated immediately (ideally in a separate room). They must be picked up as soon as possible.

All surfaces or items they touched need to be disinfected or stored away from others for 72 hours, and any isolation space must be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.

If a student has symptoms of COVID-19, can their asymptomatic siblings (or others in the household) go to school?

Yes, asymptomatic siblings or family members can continue to go to school, unless:

- The student with symptoms tests positive for COVID-19
- The student with symptoms is also a close contact (see definition below) of a positive case (in which case, the siblings or family members should all self-isolate until the test result is reported).



Close contacts at school

What is considered a close contact in a school?

When there is a case of COVID-19 in a school, a close contact is anyone who:

- has been within two metres of that person for more than 15 minutes (cumulative) while they are infectious
- shared food or drink or had contact such as hugging or kissing

Generally, all individuals who share a classroom with the case are considered close contacts.

How will close contacts be determined in a school setting?

The public health staff at your local Health Centre will work with schools to contact students/parents/guardians who have been in close contact with a positive case (e.g. grade-level cohorts or other class groups), and to determine which school staff members are close contacts.

What is considered a close contact on a bus?

Anyone seated within two rows on a bus (either in front of, behind or beside the case) could be considered a close contact. If students move around the bus or don't stay in their seat, then all individuals on the bus would be considered close contacts.

If students or staff are wearing masks at school, are they still considered close contacts?

Wearing a mask helps to prevent respiratory droplets from contaminating other people or surfaces. Masks are helpful in preventing the spread of COVID-19 with small amounts of contact (e.g., standing beside each other for a short time).

However, wearing a mask is not considered enough to guarantee prevention of the spread of COVID-19 among students or staff in close contact with a positive case.

Staying home from school (self-isolation)

When do students or staff need to self-isolate?

Anyone with symptoms should not be at school if they are ill.

Anyone with symptoms of fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, sore throat or runny nose, **MUST** legally self-isolate for 10 days after the onset of symptoms and should be tested for COVID-19. They cannot go to school or attend any public place.

[Advice for people tested for COVID-19](#) can be found [here](#).

Anyone who is identified as a close contact of a confirmed positive case must self-isolate for 14 days from the date of exposure. They cannot go to school or attend any public place. Even if they test negative for COVID-19, they must stay in isolation for 14 days.

If a child **does not have** symptoms but is identified as a close contact of a positive case, do others in their household need to self-isolate (e.g., siblings, other family members)?

No. Contacts of close contacts do not need to isolate.

COVID-19 cases, alerts, or outbreaks at school

What should I do if I am concerned my child has been exposed to COVID-19 at school?

Students may continue to attend school if they are well, unless notified by community public health staff that they are a contact of a confirmed case.

Schools will communicate to students/parents/guardians if there is a case of COVID-19 at their child's school. Community public health staff will identify and notify all close contacts of the positive case.

Parents/guardians/caregivers are encouraged to monitor their children for symptoms and can call Health Link at 811 if they have questions or concerns about their child's health.

Parents/guardians should talk to the teacher or school administrator if they have questions about specific health measures in the school, or the school re-entry plan.

What happens when a school student or staff member tests positive?

Indigenous Services Canada, First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB) Medical Officers of Health (MOH) are informed of positive results directly by the provincial laboratory or AHS Zone MOH. The FNIHB Communicable Disease Control staff will then notify the community public health staff at the local Health Centre. The staff member or student (and/or their parent/guardian) is informed of their positive test result, and provided with guidance, by community health staff.

The positive case is required to isolate at home. They cannot attend school or attend any public place until public health determines that they are no longer infectious.

How will schools be notified of positive cases in staff or students?

The community public health staff notifies the positive individual and collects information to help identify any close contacts.

The school will be notified if the positive case attended school while they were infectious. The school will be asked to help identify any students or staff that may have been exposed at school so community public health staff can notify them. All other staff, students and parents/guardians will be notified of the case or outbreak by the school.

If the positive case did not attend school while they were infectious, the school would not be notified.

What happens if there is one case of COVID-19 in a school?

One case will trigger an "alert status" and the school will work with community health staff to identify close contacts. Community public health staff will notify the First Nation school of an alert status as per contact tracing and outbreak management processes. The First Nation school/First Nation school administration will notify Leadership of the alert status (the Health Director and/or Director of Emergency Management may also be involved in the notification process, depending on the protocol of the specific First Nation).

Please see [Appendix A](#) for the COVID-19 school notification process flow diagram.

The school will inform parents/guardians of one case in the school, what actions are being taken to mitigate risk of spread and a reminder to monitor for symptoms (See [Appendix B](#) for a sample "Alert" letter).

How many cases do there need to be before an outbreak is declared?

Two or more cases of COVID-19 in a school within a 14 day period is considered an outbreak.

In the event of an outbreak, a FNIHB MOH will provide the school a letter to send to parents/guardians to notify them of the outbreak in the school, what actions are being taken to mitigate the risk of spread and a reminder to monitor for symptoms (See [Appendix C](#) for a sample letter).

Will the school be closed if there is an outbreak?

Public health measures for outbreak management are based on recommendations of the FNIHB Medical Officers of Health. In the majority of situations school closure would not be required to manage the disease control aspects of an outbreak. Extra precautions of group, class or school closures may be taken by the school.

Decisions on the need for alternate instructional delivery plans or school closures will be made by the First Nations School Administration and/or First Nation Leadership. FNIHB Medical Officers of Health are available to provide advice and recommendations to support decision-making.

When does an alert end?

If there are no more cases of COVID-19 at the school, the alert would be over 14 days after the onset date of the single case.

When does an outbreak end?

Typically, an outbreak is declared over after 28 days with no cases, but Medical Officers of Health will work with individual schools to declare an outbreak is over. When an outbreak has been declared over, schools should notify parents/guardians (See [Appendix D](#) for a template letter)

Returning to school after COVID-19 symptoms, testing or cases

When can a teacher, staff member or student return to school following a negative COVID-19 test?

A symptomatic person who tests negative can return to school when their symptoms resolve **except if** they have been identified as a close contact of a confirmed case.

An asymptomatic person who tests negative can return to school right away **except if** they have been identified as a close contact of a confirmed case.

Close contacts of cases need to complete a 14 day isolation period.

Proof of a negative test result is not a requirement.

When can a student or staff member who is identified as a close contact return to school?

Close contacts can return to school after they have completed the 14-day isolation period as long as they haven't developed any symptoms.

If a student or staff member is required to isolate, how will the school know when it is safe for them to return?

When a student or staff member are required to isolate, that person (or their parents/guardians) is responsible for following instructions and not attending any public place until it is safe to do so. It is up to them to follow the isolation requirements, and to communicate with the school about when it is safe for them to return.

Masks at school

Who is exempt from wearing masks? Is proof of an exemption needed at school?

The vast majority of staff and students should be capable of wearing a mask at school.

Family physicians can provide advice regarding medical reasons where masking is not recommended, however, proof of not being able to wear a mask at school is not required by public health authorities.

Discomfort is not a good reason to avoid wearing a mask. We all share accountability for creating a safe school environment. This includes doing the right thing to protect ourselves, our children and each other.

General masking advice is available from AHS here:

<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page17166.aspx>

Alberta Health has masking guidance for schools here:

<https://www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/COVID-19-implementing-school-re-entry-guidance.pdf>

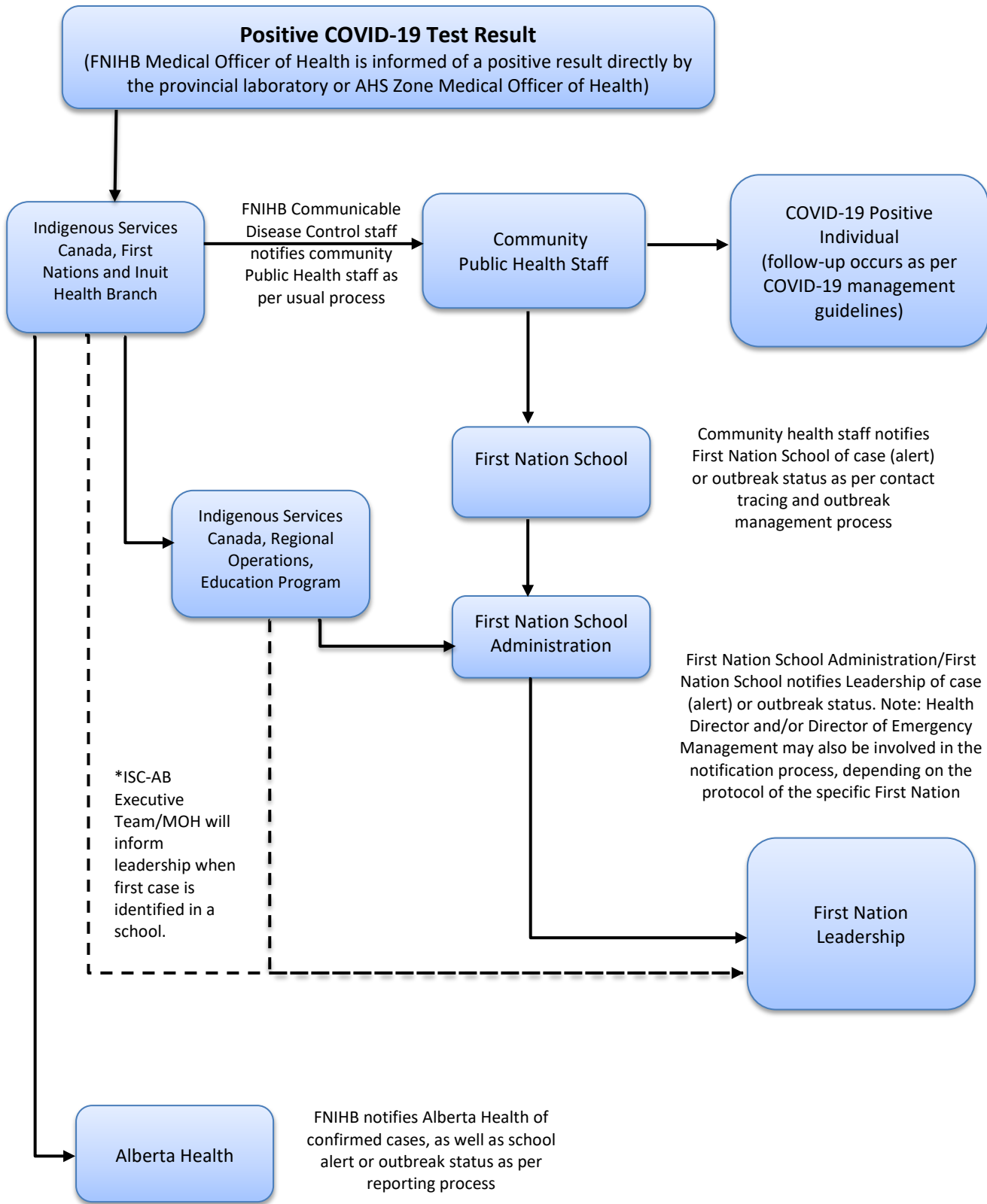
First Nation leadership, school authorities and/or individual schools may have additional requirements.

Questions can be emailed to: sac.cdemergenciesab-urgencesmtab.isc@canada.ca

Adapted from Alberta Health Services *Back to School During COVID-19: FAQ*

<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page17212.aspx>

Appendix A: COVID-19 First Nations School Notification Process Diagram



Appendix B: Sample Parent/Guardian Alert Letter

Dear Parent/Guardian,

This letter is to notify you that a case of COVID-19 has been diagnosed in an individual from [Insert School Name]. We are working closely with local health staff and Indigenous Services Canada, First Nations and Inuit Health Branch to ensure necessary measures are in place to protect all students and staff.

Community health staff will be contacting parents/guardians, as well as any staff/visitors/volunteers who may have been in close contact with the case.

We remind parents/guardians, as well as any staff/visitors/volunteers, to monitor for any signs or symptoms of COVID-19. The Alberta Health daily checklist can be found [here](#). Please remember to complete the checklist with your child and family each day prior to attending school.

As a reminder, if you/your child has any of the symptoms of illness listed on the Alberta Health daily checklist, please fill out the online [Alberta Health Services COVID-19 self-assessment](#) or call Health Link at 811 and stay home/keep your child at home.

We will continue to provide additional information to parents / guardians as it is available. The health and safety of students, families and staff continues to be our priority.

Sincerely,

[First Nation School/School Administration Contact]

Appendix C: Sample Letter - COVID-19 School Outbreak Notification to Staff, Students and Visitors

Date

To:

RE: Notice of COVID-19 to Staff, Students and Visitors in [name of school and location]

[INSERT NAME OF COMMUNITY HEALTH DEPARTMENT] are investigating cases of COVID-19 at [name of school]. The virus is passed from person to person by large, respiratory droplets, like from a cough or sneeze. This means that a person would need to have direct contact with droplets from a sick person or surfaces that they have recently touched. The risk of the general population in the school becoming infected because of these cases is low.

If staff or students have been identified as a close contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case, local community health staff will contact them directly for follow-up. If staff or students have not been identified as a close contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case but develop symptoms as listed on the daily screening tool, please self isolate at home and complete the [online assessment tool](#) or call Health Link at 811 or your local health centre as soon as possible to arrange for COVID-19 testing. If you or your child require medical attention, please call ahead to your health care provider or call Health Link at 811 to help guide you to the right care provider and make appropriate arrangements to care for yourself or your child safely.

If this is an emergency and you or your child require urgent attention, call 911 and tell them that you or your child may have been in contact with COVID-19 so that they can make appropriate arrangements to care for you or your child safely.

To help minimize spread of any respiratory virus we always recommend the following:

- Make sure everyone in your household washes their hands with soap and water often. If soap and water are not available, you can use alcohol-based hand sanitizer if hands are not visibly dirty.
- Avoid touching your face with unwashed hands.
- Use a tissue when you cough or sneeze and throw it in a garbage bin lined with a plastic bag. Wash your hands immediately after that. If you don't have a tissue, sneeze or cough into your sleeve.
- Stay home if you're sick. If your kids are sick, keep them home from school.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces that are used often and shared by everyone in your home such as door knobs, light switches and bathroom taps.
- Practice physical distancing outside the home (at least 2 metres) and wear a mask in public spaces if social distancing is not possible.
- Ensure your child's immunizations are up to date, including their annual influenza immunization.

For further information regarding COVID-19, please call Health Link at 811, and/or visit the Alberta Health Services website for COVID-19:

Sincerely,
(Medical Officer of Health).

cc: Chief and Council

Appendix D: Sample Letter- Parent/Guardian Notification Outbreak Closed

Dear Parent/Guardian,

This notification is to inform you that the outbreak at _____ school has been declared over by the Indigenous Services Canada, First Nations and Inuit Health Branch Medical Officer of Health.

We remind parents/guardians of students, as well as any staff/visitors/volunteers to continue monitoring for any signs or symptoms of COVID-19 as part of their routine daily practice. The Alberta Health daily checklist can be found [here](#). Please remember to complete the checklist each day prior to attending school.

As a reminder, if you/your child has any of the symptoms of illness listed on the Alberta Health daily checklist, please fill out the online [Alberta Health Services COVID-19 self-assessment](#) or call Health Link at 811 and stay home/keep your child at home.

Thank you for your support and continued collective efforts in protecting our school community

Sincerely,

[First Nation School/School Administration Contact]