COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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Office of Integrated Health Supports Network
Health & Safety Alert/Information

COVID-19 Overview Health & Safety Alert*

***All Information Taken Directly from CDC Guidelines (CDC, 2023).**

Introduction

COVID-19 is a disease caused by a virus named SARS-CoV-2. It can be very contagious and spreads quickly. Over one million people have died from COVID-19 in the United States.

COVID-19 most often causes respiratory symptoms that can feel much like a cold, the flu, or pneumonia. COVID-19 may attack more than the lungs and respiratory system. Other parts of the body may also be affected by the disease. Most people with COVID-19 have mild symptoms, but some people become severely ill.

Some people including those with minor or no symptoms will develop Post-COVID Conditions – also called "Long COVID."

Symptoms Of COVID-19

People with COVID-19 have had a wide range of symptoms reported – ranging from mild symptoms to severe illness. Symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure to the virus. Anyone can have mild to severe symptoms. Possible symptoms include:

- Fever or chills.
- Cough.
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing.
- Fatigue.
- Muscle or body aches.
- Headache.
- New loss of taste or smell.
- Sore throat.
- Congestion or runny nose.
- Nausea or vomiting.
- Diarrhea.

This list does not include all possible symptoms. Symptoms may change with new COVID-19 variants and can vary depending on vaccination status. Older adults and people who have underlying medical conditions like heart or lung disease or diabetes are at higher risk for getting very sick from COVID-19.

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COVID-19 Testing

Types of Tests

Viral tests look for a current infection with SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, by testing specimens from your nose or mouth. All tests should be performed following FDA's requirements.

There are two main types of viral tests:

- Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) tests.
- Antigen tests.

PCR Tests

PCR tests are the "gold standard" for COVID-19 tests. They are a type of nucleic acid amplification test (NAAT), which are more likely to detect the virus than antigen tests. A sample will usually be taken by a healthcare provider and transported to a laboratory for testing. It may take up to 3 days to receive results.

Antigen Tests

Antigen tests* are rapid tests that usually produce results in 15-30 minutes. Positive results are very accurate and reliable. However, in general, antigen tests are less likely to detect the virus than PCR tests, especially when symptoms are not present.

Therefore, a single negative antigen test cannot rule out infection. To be confident you do not have COVID-19, FDA recommends 2 negative antigen tests for individuals with symptoms or 3 antigen tests for those without symptoms, performed 48 hours apart. A single PCR test can be used to confirm an antigen test result.

*Self-tests, or at-home tests, are antigen tests that can be taken anywhere without having to go to a specific testing site. Read self-test package inserts thoroughly and follow the instructions closely when performing the test.

Free COVID-19 Tests

Visit COVIDTests.gov to order 4 additional free FDA-authorized COVID-19 tests.

Every home in the U.S. is eligible to order 4 free at-home tests beginning November 20, 2023. If you did not order 4 tests earlier in the fall, you can place tow orders for a total of 8 tests.

Order your tests today at https://www.covid.gov/tools-and-resources/resources/tests

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When to Get Tested for COVID-19

Key times to get tested:

If you have symptoms, test immediately.

- If you are only going to take a single test, a PCR test will provide a more reliable negative test result.
- If you use an antigen test, a positive result is reliable, but a negative test is not always accurate.
- If your antigen test is negative, take another antigen test after 48 hours or take a PCR test as soon as you can.

If you do not have symptoms but have been exposed to COVID-19, wait at least 5 full days after your exposure before taking a test.

- If you are only going to take a single test, a PCR test will provide a more reliable negative test result.
- If you use an antigen test, a positive result is reliable, but a negative test is not always accurate.
- If your antigen test is negative, take another antigen test after 48 hours or take a PCR test as soon as you can.
- If your second antigen test is also negative, wait another 48 hours and test a third time.

If you use an antigen test, follow recommendations for repeat testing to be confident in a negative result. Additionally, some places may test people without symptoms or a recent exposure to help keep COVID-19 from spreading to others, especially those who are at higher risk for severe illness.

Understanding Risk

Understanding the risk of COVID-19 can help make informed decisions to remain safe and healthy. If you have risk factors, have a COVID-19 plan in place in case you get sick, and discuss that plan with your healthcare provider and those close to you. Learn what extra precautions you can take to protect yourself and others in settings that make you more likely to be exposed to COVID-19.

Factors that Lower or Increase Risk of Transmission

- Length of time: How long were you with the infected person? Longer exposure time increases the risk of transmission (for example, contact longer than 15 minutes is more likely to result in transmission than two minutes of contact).

- Cough or heavy breathing: Was the infected person coughing, singing, shouting, or breathing heavily? Activities like coughing, singing, shouting, or breathing heavily due to exertion increase the risk of transmission.
- Symptoms: Did the infected person have symptoms at the time? Being around people who are symptomatic increases the risk of transmission.
- Masks: Were you or the infected person or both wearing a respirator (for example, N95) or high-quality mask? If one person was wearing a mask, the risk of transmission is decreased, and if both people were wearing masks, the risk is substantially decreased. Risk is also lower if the mask or respirator is a type that offers greater protection.
- Ventilation and filtration: How well-ventilated was the space? More outdoor air can decrease the risk of transmission. Being outside would-be lower exposure risk than being indoors, even with good ventilation and filtration; both of those options would be lower risk than being indoors with poor ventilation or filtration. See the Interactive Home Ventilation Tool.
- Distance: How close was the infected person to you? Being closer to someone who is infected with COVID-19 increases the risk of transmission. Crowded settings can raise your likelihood of being close to someone with COVID-19.

People at Higher Risk

- Older adults are more likely to get very sick or die from COVID-19. Those who are unvaccinated or have a disability, weakened immune system, or certain medical conditions are also at greater risk of getting very sick from COVID-19.
- Some people who are immunocompromised (have a weakened immune system) are more likely to get sick with COVID-19 or be sick for a longer period. People can be immunocompromised either because of a medical condition or because they receive immunosuppressive medications or treatments.
- Some people are at increased risk of getting very sick or dying from COVID-19 because of where they live or work, or because they can't get health care. This includes many people from racial and ethnic minority groups and people with disabilities.
- Respiratory infections like influenza (flu) and COVID-19 are more serious for individuals with asthma because they can lead to pneumonia and asthma attacks.
- Although the overall risks are low, if you are pregnant or were recently pregnant, you are more likely to get very sick from COVID-19 compared to people who are not pregnant. Additionally, if you have COVID-19 during pregnancy, you are at increased risk of complications that can affect your pregnancy and developing baby.

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COVID-19 Prevention Actions

There are many ways your actions can help protect you, your household, and your community from severe illness from COVID-19. CDC's COVID-19 hospital admission levels provide information about the amount of severe illness in the community where you are located to help you decide when to take action to protect yourself and others.

Prevention Actions to Use at All COVID-19 Community Levels

In addition to basic health and hygiene practices, like handwashing, CDC recommends some prevention actions at all COVID-19 hospital admission levels, which include:

- Staying up to date with COVID-19 vaccines.
- Improving ventilation.
- Getting tested for COVID-19 if needed.
- Following recommendations for what to do if you have been exposed.
- Staying home if you have suspected or confirmed COVID-19.
- Seeking treatment if you have COVID-19 and are at high risk of getting very sick.
- Avoiding contact with people who have suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

Vaccines for COVID-19

COVID-19 vaccines are safe, effective, and free. Everyone 6 months and older should get an updated COVID-19 vaccine.

- CDC recommends the 2023–2024 updated COVID-19 vaccines: Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, or Novavax, to protect against serious illness from COVID-19.
- Everyone aged 5 years and older should get 1 dose of an updated COVID-19 vaccine to protect against serious illness from COVID-19.
- Children aged 6 months–4 years need multiple doses of COVID-19 vaccines to be up to date, including at least 1 dose of updated COVID-19 vaccine.
- People who are moderately or severely immunocompromised may get additional doses of updated COVID-19 vaccine.
- COVID-19 vaccine recommendations will be updated as needed by the CDC.

What To Do If Exposed to COVID-19

If you were exposed to COVID-19, you should start taking precautions. If you have tested positive or are showing symptoms of COVID-19, isolate immediately.

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If you were exposed to the virus that causes COVID-19 or have been told by a healthcare provider or public health authority that you were exposed, here are the steps that you should take, regardless of your vaccination status or if you have had a previous infection.

- After Being Exposed to COVID-19. Start precautions immediately.
  - Wear a mask as soon as you find out you were exposed.
  - Start counting from Day 1.
  - Day 0 is the day of your last exposure to someone with COVID-19.
  - Day 1 is the first full day after your last exposure.
  - Continue precautions 10 full days. You can still develop COVID-19 up to 10 days after you have been exposed.
  - Get tested at least 5 full days after your last exposure. Test even if you don't develop symptoms.

If Sick or Caring for Someone Who is Sick with COVID-19

Contact a healthcare provider right away or visit a Test to Treat location. Treatment must be started within the first few days to be effective. Seek emergency medical attention if someone is showing any emergency warning signs, call 911.

- Stay home and separate from others.
- Improve ventilation (air flow) at home to help prevent COVID-19 from spreading to other people.
  - Use this interactive tool to learn how to improve air flow at home.
- Monitor symptoms and follow healthcare provider instructions.
  - Rest, drink fluids, and use over-the-counter medicines for fever.
- Practice everyday hygiene and cleaning and avoid sharing personal household items.
  - Wash your hands often.
  - Cover coughs and sneezes.
- Wear a high-quality mask or respirator when around other people. Wear a mask with the best fit, protection, and comfort.
- If you are caring for someone with COVID-19:
  - Follow everyday preventative actions.
  - Wear a high-quality mask when you must be around the sick individual.
  - Learn what to do after being exposed to COVID-19.

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Long COVID or Post-COVID Conditions

Some people who have been infected with the virus that causes COVID-19 can experience long-term effects from their infection, known as Long COVID or Post-COVID Conditions (PCC).

Long COVID is broadly defined as signs, symptoms, and conditions that continue or develop after acute COVID-19 infection. This definition of Long COVID was developed by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in collaboration with CDC and other partners.

People call Long COVID by many names, including Post-COVID Conditions, long-haul COVID, post-acute COVID-19, long-term effects of COVID, and chronic COVID. The term post-acute sequelae of SARS CoV-2 infection (PASC) is also used to refer to a subset of Long COVID.

There is no test that determines if your symptoms or condition is due to COVID-19. Long COVID is not one illness. Your healthcare provider considers a diagnosis of Long COVID based on your health history, including if you had a diagnosis of COVID-19 either by a positive test or by symptoms or exposure, as well as based on a health examination.

- Long COVID can include a wide range of ongoing health problems; these conditions can last weeks, months, or years.
- Long COVID occurs more often in people who had severe COVID-19 illness, but anyone who has been infected with the virus that causes COVID-19 can experience it.
- People who are not vaccinated against COVID-19 and become infected may have a higher risk of developing Long COVID compared to people who have been vaccinated.
- People can be reinfected with SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, multiple times. Each time a person is infected or reinfected with SARS-CoV-2, they have a risk of developing Long COVID.
- While most people with Long COVID have evidence of infection or COVID-19 illness, in some cases, a person with Long COVID may not have tested positive for the virus or known they were infected.
- CDC and partners are working to understand more about who experiences Long COVID and why, including whether groups disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 are at higher risk.

In July 2021, Long COVID was added as a recognized condition that could result in a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Learn more: Guidance on "Long COVID" as a Disability Under the ADA.

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When to Seek Emergency Medical Attention

Look for emergency warning signs for COVID 19:

- Trouble breathing.
- Persistent pain or pressure in the chest.
- New confusion.
- Inability to wake or stay awake.
- Pale, gray, or blue-colored skin, lips, or nail beds, depending on skin tone.

If someone is showing any of these signs, **CALL 911** or call ahead to your local emergency facility. Notify the operator that you are seeking care for someone who has or may have COVID-19.

Difference Between Flu and COVID-19

Influenza (Flu) and COVID-19 are both contagious respiratory illnesses, but they are caused by different viruses. COVID-19 is caused by infection with a coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2, and flu is caused by infection with influenza viruses.

You cannot tell the difference between flu and COVID-19 by symptoms alone because some of the symptoms are the same. Some PCR tests can differentiate between flu and COVID-19 at the same time. If one of these tests is not available, many testing locations provide flu and COVID-19 tests separately. Talk to a healthcare provider about getting tested for both flu and COVID-19 if you have symptoms.

Resources and Printable Handouts

Isolation and Precautions if You Have COVID-19. Follow isolation and precaution recommendations if you have or suspect you have COVID-19. These steps help prevent spreading the virus to others in your household and your community. Take precautions regardless of your vaccination status.

COVID-19 Plan. Put together your COVID-19 plan so you have all the information you need on hand if you get sick with COVID-19. Download, edit and save, and share your plan with your family, friends, and healthcare provider.

Don't Delay: Test Soon and Treat Early. If you are having COVID-19 symptoms and at high risk of getting very sick, don't delay. Test as soon as possible and if positive, contact your healthcare provider. Treatment must start early to work.

Symptoms of COVID-19. People with COVID-19 have had a wide range of symptoms ranging from mild symptoms to severe illness. Symptoms may appear 2-14 days after

exposure to the virus. Possible symptoms include: cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, congestion, sore throat, fever or chills, fatigue, headache or body aches, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea, and new loss of taste or smell.

10 Things You Can Do to Manage Your COVID-19 Symptoms at Home. Factsheet for things you can do at home to manage your COVID-19 Symptoms.

Know When to Wash Your Hands. Know when to wash your hands at school. Wash them after coughing, sneezing, or blowing your nose, after using the bathroom, when they look dirty, after playing outside, before eating, or after touching animals or their cages.

Healthcare Appointment Checklist. This checklist is designed to help patients and caregivers get the most out of appointments with healthcare providers for post-COVID conditions.

After Your Appointment. If you have been diagnosed with a post-COVID condition or are waiting to hear back from your provider about a post-COVID condition diagnosis, reviewing your appointment notes and preparing for your next one can help you get the most out of your appointments.

Reference

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2023, July). About COVID-19. National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD), Division of Viral Diseases

To the best of the OIHSN Nursing Team's knowledge the information contained within this alert is current and accurate. If the reader discovers any broken or inactive hyperlinks, typographical errors, or out-of-date content please send email to communitynursing@dbhds.virginia.gov to include the title of the Health & Safety alert with specifics details of concern.