

# Updated FAQs for School Principals or Designated Contact Person

This leaflet was developed for school principals or designated contact person by HSE Public Health in collaboration with the Department of Education.

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## 1. If a positive case is identified from your school:

**Q: If the school is informed of a positive case, what should the school do?**

**A. Await instructions from HSE Public Health - classes do not need to be sent home or told not to come in to school.**

It is important to remember that the confirmed case is no longer within the school and therefore the risk of onward transmission from that person has been removed from the school setting.

If the case was not in the school setting whilst infectious, then HSE Public Health will not routinely call the school because there is no significant risk that the case has spread the infection in the school setting.

If the case of Covid-19 was in the school during the infectious period the school will be contacted by the HSE. This will usually be on the same day that the HSE is informed that the case attended schools whilst infectious, but may be the next day. However it is important to remember that **the confirmed case is no longer in school. Anyone who has symptoms which could be consistent with Covid-19 should be isolated as per normal procedure. It takes an average of 4-7 days before any other person might become unwell and infectious to others (Incubation period).** This allows time for the HSE Public Health to contact schools as appropriate.

### **Q: What is the infectious period?**

The 'infectious period' is the timeframe during which someone with an infectious disease can spread it to other people – the 'infectious period' for Covid-19 includes the 24 hours before testing for asymptomatic cases, or the 48 hours before symptom onset for symptomatic cases.

It should not be automatically assumed that a whole class will be deemed as close contacts. This is because the school settings are so varied e.g. in young primary school children, 'the pod' will likely be deemed close contacts and removed. **In post primary settings where there is social distancing rather than a 'pod' per se, close contacts will be determined by proximity and interaction with the index case; particular attention is given to close friendship groups.**

### **Q: What are the contact details of the HSE live Covid-19 Principal school line?**

For Covid-19 queries related to confirmed cases in your schools where you haven't heard from HSE Public Health, please ring the 'HSE live Covid-19 Principal school line' on **X**. **(This number is not a public number and is for school principals or the schools designated contact person only)**

The phone number will operate 7 days a week, from 8am to 4.30pm Monday to Friday and from 10am to 4.30pm Saturday and Sunday. The operator will take basic details and provide the details directly to the relevant Schools team in the HSE Public Health department. Every effort will be made for a same day response, unless it is later in the afternoon when the response may come the following day.

**N.B. Please also check your own contact details on the Department of Education POD/PPOD system i.e. your mobile and email details in order to facilitate contact from the HSE to you if necessary.**

## **2. Pods:**

### **Q. Do 'pods' still need to be organised and implemented?**

**A.** Yes. We have asked pupils to be in pods in primary school as per last year and that indoors these pods are small and kept in place as much as possible. This is to ensure that the number of close contacts is as limited as possible, and therefore the risks to others within the class are kept to the lowest number.

**This year we have asked that close friends might sit together where possible in both primary and post primary settings** to further ensure the number of close contacts and those at onward risk are kept as low as possible within the community.

### 3. Vaccination:

#### Q. Who is recommended to have Covid-19 vaccines?

A. The National Immunisation Advisory Committee make recommendations for vaccinations to the Department of Health. Currently, all those aged 12 and above are eligible and recommended for Covid-19 vaccination. Further information on national Covid-19 vaccination recommendations are available at <https://www2.hse.ie/screening-and-vaccinations/Covid-19-vaccine/>

#### Q. Are Principals expected to know who is vaccinated within their schools?

A. No. This is private health information and the HSE ascertains this information as required and keeps it confidential. Schools are not expected to know the vaccination status of pupils/students or staff for contact tracing purposes.

### 4. Close contact information:

Close contacts are assessed based on their contact with a confirmed case of Covid-19 during their infectious period - 48 hours before the onset of symptoms if symptomatic, or 24 hours before the test for Covid-19 was taken in those who are asymptomatic.

#### Close contacts – vaccinated

#### Q. What happens if someone is identified as a close contact but is fully vaccinated?

A. Currently, the national guidance is that someone who is fully vaccinated does not need to restrict their movements or undertake routine testing for Covid-19, as long as they have no symptoms of Covid-19.

#### Close contacts – not vaccinated

#### Q. What is the period of restricted movements required of pupils/students/staff members deemed to be a “close contact” who are not fully vaccinated?

A. Pupils/students/staff who are not fully vaccinated will be asked to restrict their movements as has always been the case. Furthermore, a small subset of vaccinated people (e.g. immunocompromised) may well be asked to also restrict their movements, the HSE Contact Management Team will determine this.

This involves:

- restricting movements for 14 days OR
- undertaking testing at Day 0 and Day 10. If a close contact receives a ‘not detected’ result from both tests, and has no symptoms consistent with Covid-19, then she/he can end her/his restricted movements and return to school, unless HSE Public Health has specifically advised differently. If they have a ‘detected’ test result, they will then be managed as a case of Covid-19.

As per data protection regulations, a school cannot divulge or confirm the name of the pupil/student and/or staff member who tested positive (‘detected’) for Covid-19.

**Q: Can family members of a pupil/student/staff member (who has been identified as a close contact) attend school?**

**A:** Yes, as long as the family members have not also been designated close contacts by HSE Public Health. Only the pupil/student/staff member who is a close contact needs to restrict her/his movements, even though she/he has no symptoms. However, no other family member is required to do so and can still attend school – unless also identified as a close contact by HSE Public Health.

If however, the pupil/student/staff member who is a close contact develops symptoms of Covid-19, then they are a suspected case of Covid-19 and should now self-isolate and contact their GP, explaining that they have been identified as a close contact of a confirmed case of Covid-19 and that they now have symptoms too.

If the GP determines they are now a suspected case of Covid-19, they will arrange testing and:

- the close contact should continue to self-isolate and
- household members should restrict their movements, as per guidance for household contacts of a suspected case of Covid-19.

**Previous infection with Covid-19**

**Q. What if a pupil/student/staff member informs the school that they have had Covid-19 previously?**

**A.** Staff/pupils/students, and in the case of young children, the parents/guardians should be told to discuss the matter with HSE Public Health. If there is clear evidence of a confirmed infection with Covid-19 within the past 9 months, as per national guidelines, then as long as staff/student has no symptoms, they are not determined as a close contact and do not need to restrict their movements. In specific circumstances - e.g. a new Variant of Concern - the public health doctor may request a different approach, but if this is the case it will be clearly communicated by HSE Public Health.

## **5. Contact from HSE Public Health:**

**Q: What should I expect when HSE Public Health call me?**

**A:**

**Primary, special classes and special schools**

The HSE Schools Teams will contact the principal to enable identification of any close contacts. The principal will then be emailed separately by the HSE and will be sent an excel sheet that they will be asked to provide information about the designated close contacts, such that they can be entered in to the HSE Public Health system. This enables them to be contacted and offered testing as appropriate, and allows them to be visible as a group to clinicians following up on test results. The information required will be in the format of an excel sheet. The contact details for this service are: [Hsecovid19schools@abtran.com](mailto:Hsecovid19schools@abtran.com) and 021 4819351.

It will not be automatically assumed that a whole class will be deemed as close contacts. This is because school settings are so varied e.g. in the case of young primary school children, 'the pod' will likely be deemed close contacts and removed.

### **Post-primary schools:**

The HSE Contact Management Team will contact the case directly, as many in this age group are able to explain directly the nature of their contacts within the setting and HSE Public Health can rapidly follow up. An email will be sent with relevant information and advice to the Principal. The HSE Contact Management Team may ring principals if they need to confirm contact details for the close contacts identified. HSE Public Health follow up as normal with any outbreaks or complexities.

The definition of close contacts, as above, is on the [HPSC website](#), and this is used, with the information identified from discussions with principals/cases and/or teachers, to determine who the close contacts are within the school setting.

It will not be automatically assumed that a whole class will be deemed as close contacts. In post primary settings where there is social distancing rather than a 'pod' per se, close contacts will be determined by proximity and interaction with the index case; particular attention is given to close friendship groups.

### **Q. Will HSE Public Health provide instructions to the school as to how to proceed?**

**A.** Yes.

For post primary schools an email from HSE Public Health will be sent to post-primary principals regarding a case within their setting.

For primary, SEN schools or in the case of outbreaks in all settings, a member of the HSE Schools Teams will directly contact and advise on next steps which need to be taken.

The advice will typically include asking the school principal to:

- Contact the parents/guardians of the pupils/students, who are determined by HSE Public Health to be 'close contacts'. Parents/guardians of these pupils/students will be asked by the school principal to collect them from school as soon as is safely and practically possible, so they can start restricting their movements pending contact from HSE Public Health and ascertainment of vaccination status. This may still be at the end of the school day. HSE Public Health may also ask the school to issue a letter / text message or written guidance to these parents/guardians, prepared and provided by HSE Public Health.
- Contact any staff member who may be determined by HSE Public Health to be a "close contact" and ask him/her to start restricting his/her movements, pending contact from HSE Public Health to ascertain vaccination status.

**Q: What happens if teachers or students receive notifications on the HSE Covid Tracker App?**

**A:** Close contacts within the school setting are identified by HSE Public Health. If there is any information from the HSE Covid Tracker App, this information will be considered. However, it may be that not all people who are alerted through the App are actually deemed close contacts, or vice versa – HSE Public Health might determine that some people who have not been notified by the App are close contacts. While the Covid tracker App is a very useful tool for collecting information on potential close contacts, HSE Public Health risk assessment and advice overrides the App. This is because the Public Health Risk Assessment (PHRA) collects more nuanced, composite information to better appraise infection transmission risk in defined circumstances.

**Q: If there is a case identified - how far back do HSE Public Health go to consider close contacts?**

**A:** For a confirmed case of Covid-19 who was symptomatic, HSE Public Health will identify close contacts in the 48-hour period before the person became symptomatic. If the confirmed case was asymptomatic, then HSE Public Health will identify close contacts for the 24-hour period before the test was taken.

**Q. Is contact tracing within the school community always required?**

**A.** No. It may well be that for someone who is identified as a confirmed case of Covid-19 there is no need to do any contact tracing within the school setting. This would be because the person was not in school while infectious and therefore no contact tracing of other persons within the school will be required. **In this instance HSE Public Health would not contact the school.**

**Q: I have heard that someone from the school has been identified as a confirmed case of Covid-19 – why has HSE Public Health not contacted me?**

**A:** It may have already been determined that there are no close contacts or onward transmission risk within the school setting, for example if the individual was not in the school during the infectious period. When HSE Public Health do need to contact a school, they will usually do so the same day, or following day. This is safe practice, as the case is no longer within the school setting, and therefore the risk of onward transmission from this case is no longer present.

**Q: Will a pupil's/student's/staff member's result be shared with the educational facility?**

**A:** Covid-19 tests remain confidential as per patient – doctor confidentiality. No other pupil/student, parent/guardian, family or staff member will be informed of the results.

However, parents/guardians should be advised, at the point of testing that if their child's result is positive for Covid-19 and they were infectious whilst in school, then the test result will likely need to be shared with an appropriate named individual within the school/educational facility, if this is deemed necessary by the Medical Officer of Health for onward safe management of the situation.

**Q: Can the school share a name of the pupil/student or staff member who is a confirmed case of Covid-19?**

**A:** No, the school cannot share the name of the person who has tested positive for Covid-19. This information is private and confidential. Close contacts will not be told the name of the confirmed case.

**Q: Is the school complying with GDPR requirements when collecting and sharing information on complex/close contacts with the HSE Public Health?**

**A:** Yes, under the Infectious Diseases Regulations 1981, as amended, Medical Officers of Health (MOH) ask that you collect the data, keep it secure and release it only to HSE Public Health when requested to do so as part of the investigations into a confirmed or suspected case of Covid-19. Processing of these data by the MOH is provided for under GDPR, special category data 9 2(i).

**Q: What if the press media or wider school community contact the school?**

**A:** The following is a generic statement that schools may wish to consider using in full or part in response to press/media queries.

“The school cannot comment on individual cases or outbreaks of Covid-19 to protect the privacy and confidentiality of those involved.

The school can confirm that we have engaged with HSE Public Health. The HSE’s role includes carrying out a PHRA. As part of this risk assessment, all close contacts will be identified, contacted and advised of the next steps. Close contacts are requested not to come to school, in line with HSE Public Health advice. If HSE Public Health does not make contact with you, you are not impacted and can continue to attend school.

The school will continue to work with HSE Public Health in ensuring all necessary hygiene, health and safety protocols are in place at the school for the prevention and containment of Covid-19.”

## **6. Close contact testing**

**Q: How will a test be set up for persons identified as a close contact?**

**A:** HSE Public Health will send a text message with the appointment date, time and location of the free Covid-19 test(s).

**Q: How soon will the pupil/student/staff member receive a test after being identified as a close contact?**

**A:** HSE Public Health will advise on the timing of a test for close contacts. Testing will be arranged within 1-2 days. Close contacts are recommended to have two tests; one ‘as soon as possible’ and the second at day 10.

**Q: Will the pupil/student/staff member receive one test or more than one test? If the latter, why?**

**A:** HSE Public Health will advise whether a pupil/student/staff member needs one or more tests for Covid-19. They will usually require testing on Day 0 and Day 10 since their exposure to the confirmed case, but there may be circumstances whereby HSE Public Health require only one test to be undertaken, for example if sufficient time has elapsed since contact with the case occurred.

**Q: If a test comes back as “not detected” for a symptomatic pupil/student/staff member, will the person still be required to restrict their movements and why?**

**A:** Yes. If the person receives a negative / ‘not detected’ test result, the person should remain at home until they are well enough to return to school, unless parents/guardians of (pupil/students) or staff members are specifically asked by HSE Public Health to remain excluded because of further investigation.

A pupil/student /staff member can return to their normal activities, once they have been given either:

- a negative (‘not-detected’) test result **and** are 48 hours without symptoms
- or**
- another diagnosis, which is not Covid-19.

Those who live with the person will then no longer need to restrict their movements.

**Q: If a test comes back ‘SARS-CoV-2 detected’ (confirmed case of Covid-19) will the pupil /student/staff member still be required to self-isolate?**

**A:** If a person was symptomatic for Covid-19 they should already be self-isolating. If a close contact who was restricting her/his movements receives a positive Covid-19 test result (SARS-CoV-2 detected), she/he is now a confirmed case of Covid-19 and must self-isolate; additionally, their close contacts including household contacts, must now also start restricting their movements, pending contact from HSE Public Health. They may already have been restricting their movements. If only one person in the house was deemed a close contact from an exposure outside the house (e.g. in the school) up to this point, then the other family members would not have been restricting their movements.

**Q: If a pupil/student/staff member has tested positive for Covid-19 and self-isolated for 10 days thereafter, can they return to school/work?**

**A:** Yes, provided the following applies:

- they have self-isolated for 10 days from onset of symptoms with the last 5 days without a fever (high temperature (38 degrees Celsius or over)
- or**
- if they were asymptomatic they must have self-isolated for 10 days from date of test)



## 7. A pupil/student/staff member develops symptoms

**Q: What should the school do if a pupil/student is displaying symptoms while at school?**

**A:** The pupil/student should immediately be brought to the designated isolation area in the school, which should have good ventilation and preferably a window to the outside that opens.

The school should contact the parents/ guardians and ask them to collect their child as soon as possible. The pupil/student should be cared for appropriately by a designated staff member until they are collected. The staff member who is caring for the child should take all necessary precautions as outlined in the HSE Public Health guidance document. The staff member assisting with the pupil/student does not need to go home unless she/he develops symptoms themselves, or are later advised to by HSE Public Health.

After the symptomatic pupil/student has left the isolation space, it should be cleaned and contact surfaces disinfected.

Please see link to symptoms of Covid-19 as per the HSE website [here](#)

**Q. What should the school do if a staff member is displaying symptoms while at school?**

**A.** The onus is on the staff member to immediately inform the principal that s/he is displaying symptoms. The staff member should immediately go home, self- isolate and seek medical review by her/his GP (The staff member should phone the GP and not attend in person. The GP assessment for Covid-19, and Covid testing if required are free of cost).

**Q: What should the school do if they are informed over the phone that a pupil/student is symptomatic?**

**A:** Schools can remind parents/guardians that if they are concerned a child may have symptoms of Covid-19, the child should not attend school and they should contact their GP without delay. No further actions are required of the school at this stage.

**Q. Should a school advise the school community that a pupil/student/staff member is symptomatic?**

**A.** No. Schools are asked to note that they should not inform other parents/guardians or staff members that a pupil/student/staff member has gone home due to their symptoms. Other pupils/students or staff do not need to be removed from class. This includes siblings or other household members of staff or pupils/students.

**Q: If a pupil/student/staff member has symptoms which may be consistent with Covid-19 – what does the parents/guardian/staff member need to do?**

**A:** If a child has symptoms which could be consistent with Covid-19, the parents/guardians should call their GP. In the case of a student over the age of 18 or a staff member, the student/staff member should call their GP. Their GP will decide whether they should be tested for Covid-19. If the GP determines that the child or

student/staff member does need a Covid-19 test, the individual is referred for a Covid-19 test, s/he will receive a text message from HSE Public Health with information of the appointment (time and place). It is at this point that all of their household contacts are asked to restrict their movements. This means that siblings or staff members in the same household as the person who has symptoms should restrict their movements and not attend school. Only the symptomatic case is asked to self-isolate.

**Note:** there will be many cases where testing is determined not to be required, for example, because the GP thinks that the child's symptoms are not due to Covid-19 **and might be due to another cause. If the GP does not recommend Covid testing**, and it is early in the child's illness, the recommendation is to observe the child for 48 hours and if no further symptoms develop, then they can return to school. If the GP has made a different diagnosis, parents/guardians should follow advice and recommendations on exclusion depending on this diagnosis.

**Q: How soon will the pupil/student/staff member receive a test?**

**A:** The person will receive an automated notification of a scheduled appointment at a testing centre at the next possible free slot for testing.

**Q: Will the pupil/student/staff member receive one test or more than one test on the basis of being symptomatic?**

**A.** If the pupil/student/staff member is experiencing symptoms and has been referred for testing by their GP, she/he will receive one test.

## 8. Data

The legal basis for sharing requested data with the HSE Public Health / Contact Management Team (Medical Officers of Health and staff in Department of HSE Public Health) is the [Infectious Diseases Regulations 1981](#) as amended which provides the legal responsibility for HSE Public Health in Article 11 and the authority in Article 19 which states that 'Any person who refuses to comply with a requirement or direction given or a request for information made in pursuance of any of the provisions of these Regulations shall be guilty of a contravention of these Regulations'. This legislation fulfils [GDPR](#) Article 6 conditions c, d, and e regarding lawfulness of processing, and processing of special categories of personal data is allowed under Article 9 2 (i).

Schools data is presented weekly on the HSE website [here](#). It presents information on the number of facilities a PHRA and onward testing has been undertaken and the close contact positivity i.e. for each index case identified to us who attended school in their infectious time period, how many of the identified close contacts tested positive for Covid-19. So far, the data across the school academic year 2021/22 have been reassuring. However, it is very important all mitigation measures and infection, prevention and control measures recommended are still fully implemented; including the exclusion of those with symptoms consistent with Covid-19.

**Up to date information and advice on coronavirus is available on [hse.ie](https://www.hse.ie)**