When Should a Child Stay Home From School and/or Child Care?

A Virginia Department of Health Guideline
for Evaluating a Child with COVID-19 Symptoms or Exposure

VDH VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

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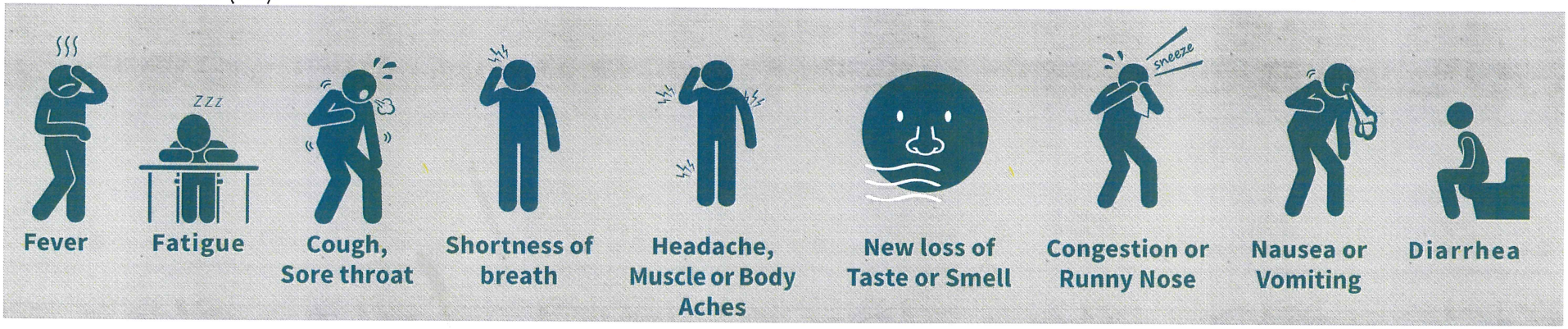
Introduction

As schools and child care facilities reopen during the Fall of 2020, parents and guardians, school and child care personnel, and health-care providers all play a role in identifying possible cases of COVID-19 and taking quick action to limit the spread of disease in homes, schools, and child care facilities. This is very challenging because the symptoms of COVID-19 are similar to other common illnesses, like colds and influenza (flu).

The goal of this guideline is to help parents and guardians, school and child care personnel, and healthcare providers assess a child's symptoms and exposure to COVID-19 to determine when and for how long the child needs to stay away from others in an effort to prevent the spread of disease.



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**. People with these symptoms may have COVID-19:

- Fever (≥100.4°F) 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.

If someone is showing any of the following signs, seek emergency medical care immediately:

- Trouble breathing,
- persistent pain or pressure in the chest,
- new confusion,
- inability to wake up or stay awake,
- or bluish lips or face.

www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html

General Prevention Tips

There are general COVID-19 prevention tips that are important for everyone to know and follow consistently. This section includes steps everyone should take to prevent COVID-19, what to do if a child has a fever, and what to do if a child has been exposed to someone who is sick with COVID-19.

1. **There are steps every person needs to take every day** to help slow down the number of people getting sick with COVID-19. These are well known and summarized in the figure below.

- Physical distancing – maintain 6 feet from others
- Wear a mask when physical distancing is not possible
- Avoid crowds when indoors and outdoors
- Wash hands or use hand sanitizer frequently
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces
- Stay at home and away from others (self-isolate) if any symptoms of COVID-19 develop

2. **Any child who has a fever should not go to school or child care.** If the fever goes away after taking fever-reducing medicine (for example, acetaminophen/Tylenol or ibuprofen/Motrin), the child still needs to stay home. In fact, the child should be kept home and away from others until the fever has been gone for at least 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medicine. Other symptoms of illness (such as cough or runny nose) should also be improved before the child goes back to school or child care.
3. **Anyone who has had close contact with someone who has, or might have, COVID-19 needs to stay away from others.** Close contact means anyone who has been within 6 feet of the sick person for 15 minutes or longer or anyone who has had contact with the person's respiratory secretions from the mouth or nose. Typically, close contacts include all the people who live in the same house. It can take up to 14 days for a person who has been exposed to the virus that causes COVID-19 to start having any signs or symptoms of illness. Because of this, someone who has been in close contact with a person who has, or might have, COVID-19 **needs to stay away from others for 14 days after the date of last exposure**. Staying away from others because you have been exposed to the virus when you are not sick is called **'quarantine'.**

During quarantine, it is important to watch to see if symptoms develop. A person who is in quarantine and begins to get sick should be tested for COVID-19. If it turns out the person has COVID-19, determined by either a positive lab test or a diagnosis by a healthcare provider, then he or she needs to stay away from others for **10 days after the symptoms started**. When an ill person has to stay away from others, it is called **'isolation'**. Isolation lasts for 10 days because that is how long a person with COVID-19 might be able to spread it to others.

Anytime isolation is recommended for someone, based on a positive lab test for COVID-19 or based on a combination of symptoms plus close contact with someone with COVID-19, that person's close contacts need to stay home and be quarantined from others for 14 days after the date of last contact.

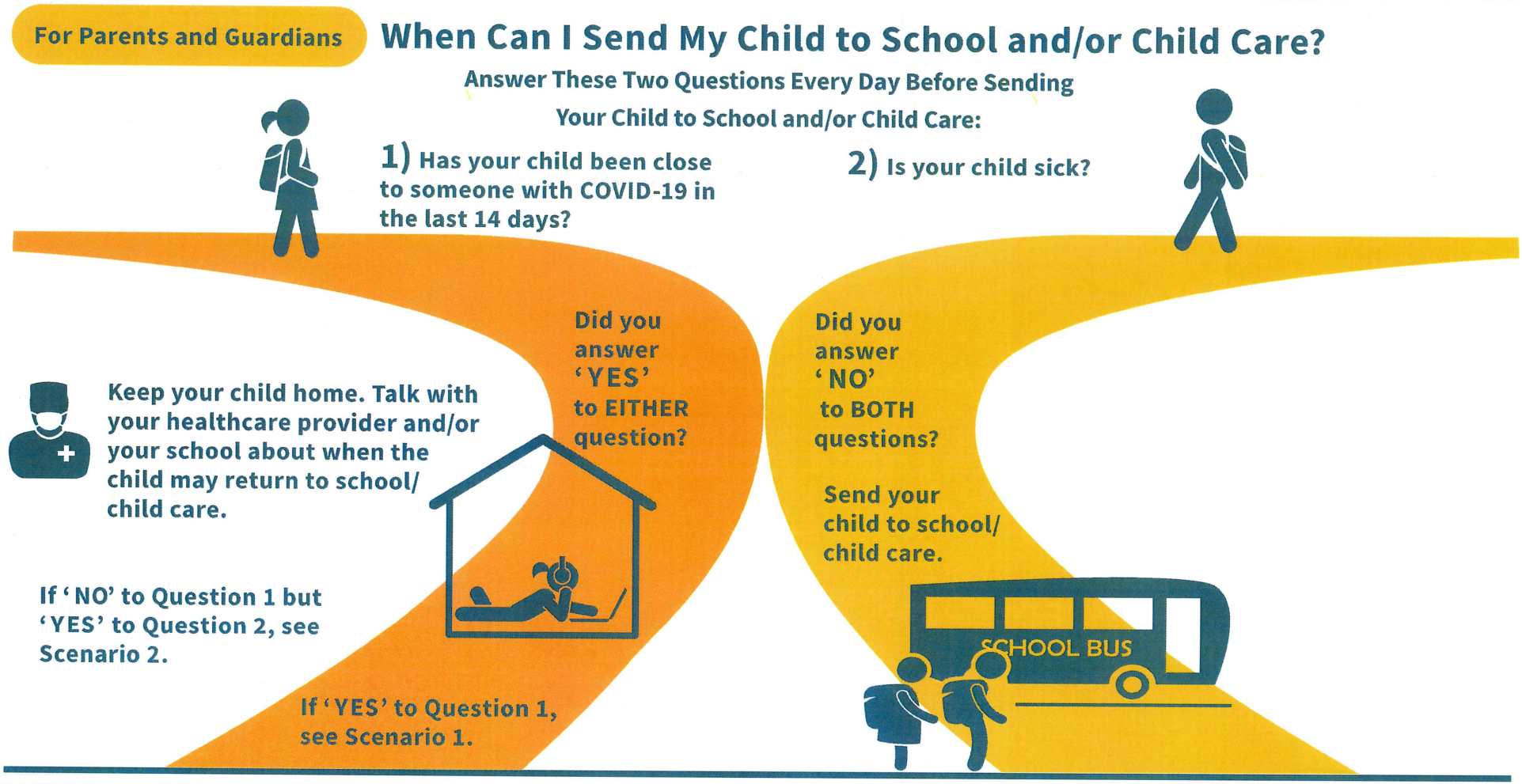
Steps For Parents and Guardians

Parents and guardians need to evaluate each child every day before sending the child out of the house by asking two questions:

1. Has the child had close contact with someone who has COVID-19 in the last 14 days? AND
2. Is the child sick?

If the answer to both questions is 'No', then the child can go to school or child care or any other planned activities for the day. Remember that it is important for everyone to follow the prevention steps listed earlier (like wearing a mask and staying 6 feet away from other people) while outside of the house.

If the answer to either question is 'Yes', then the child should be kept at home. Next steps in assessing the child will depend on symptoms and/or possible exposure to the virus. These steps are described in the graphic as Scenario 1 and Scenario 2 in the section on 'Steps for School and Child Care Personnel.'



Steps For Parents and Guardians, continued

If the child had close contact with someone with COVID-19, then the child must stay home in quarantine for 14 days after the date of last contact, whether or not the child is sick. (See the 'Definition of Terms' section for a reminder about what quarantine means.) More information about this is provided in Scenario 1.

The trickier part is what to do if a child is sick, especially because the symptoms of COVID-19 are the same as the symptoms of other illnesses, including the common cold, influenza (flu), and gastroenteritis (vomiting and diarrhea, or a 'stomach bug').

Parents and guardians know their child and are best equipped to recognize whether the child's symptoms are routine, or 'normal', on that day. For example, a child with allergies or asthma might have a cough or runny nose every day, even though they are not contagious. If the symptoms seem normal for the child and are not of any unusual concern, then the parents or guardians are encouraged to manage the symptoms the way they usually do. **This does not apply if the child has a fever.** A child with a fever should not go to school or child care. However, in the absence of fever, parents and guardians might choose to keep the child home for a day, take care of the child's symptoms, monitor for any change, and send the child back to school and/or child care when symptoms have improved. Consultation with the child's healthcare provider is encouraged. School and child care personnel need to be notified if the child will not be attending that day.

If the symptoms are new or different for that child, or concerning for parents and guardians, then the child should be kept at home and the school and/or child care facility notified that the child will be absent. Consultation with the child's healthcare provider is strongly encouraged. The healthcare provider will likely do the following:

1. assess the child's symptoms,
2. assess any exposures the child might have had to others with COVID-19 or to areas with higher rates of COVID-19,
3. make a decision about whether to test for COVID-19, and
4. give the parent or guardian recommendations about when the child may return to school and/or child care.

More information on how the healthcare provider will decide when the child can return to school and/or child care is in the section on 'Steps for Healthcare Providers to Take.' **A child who is tested for COVID-19 because of symptoms or close contact with someone with COVID-19 should be kept at home while waiting for the test results.**

Consulting with your child's healthcare provider is recommended if the child has symptoms of COVID-19 or close contact with a person who has COVID-19.

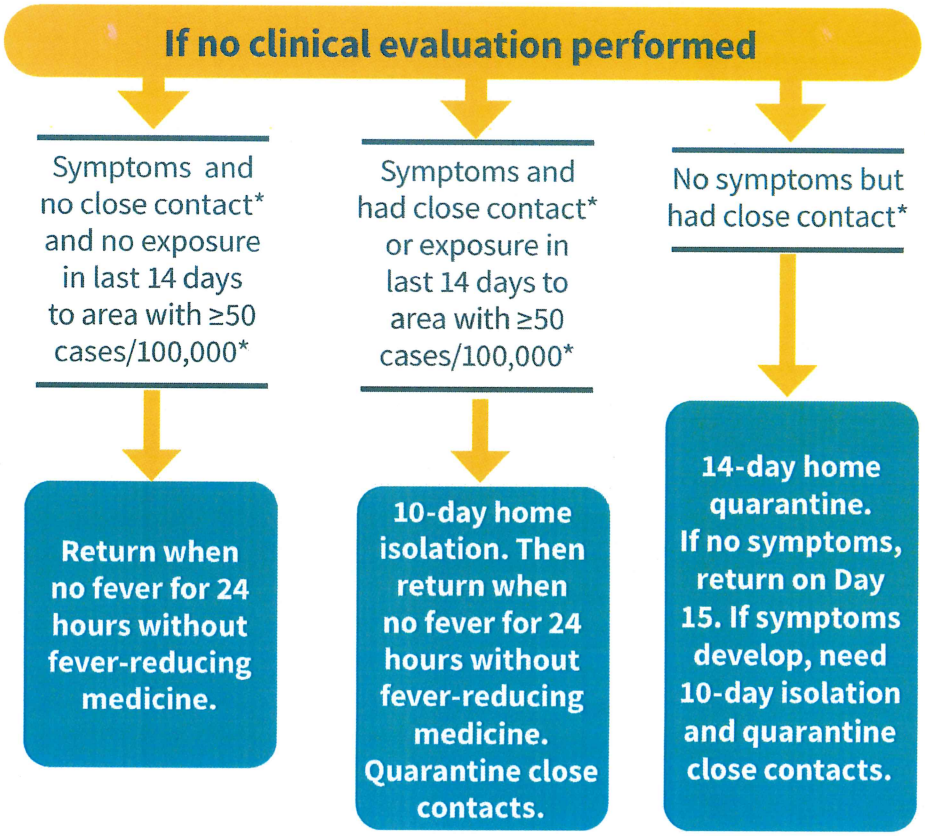
Steps For Parents and Guardians, continued

Parents and guardians who elect not to consult with a healthcare provider about new or unusual symptoms in their child will need to consider the risk of exposure to COVID-19 their child has had when making return to school/child care decisions. The three main scenarios are as follows:

- **Anyone who has had close contact with someone with COVID-19 needs to stay in quarantine for 14 days after the date of last contact.** Even if the child is tested for COVID-19 and has a negative test, the child must still stay home for the full 14 days. This is because it can take up to 14 days after exposure to the virus that causes COVID-19 to become infected.
  - If no symptoms develop during the whole quarantine period, the child may return to school or child care on Day 15.
  - If symptoms develop, then the child needs to enter a 10-day period of isolation that starts on the day after symptoms start. After the 10-day isolation, the child may return to school or child care once symptoms have improved and the child has been fever-free for at least 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medicine.
  - Household and other close contacts of children who develop symptoms while in quarantine need to stay in quarantine for 14 days and be monitored in this same way to see if symptoms develop.

- **Anyone who has symptoms AND, within the past 14 days, either 1) had close contact OR 2) had been in an area that has high rates of COVID-19, needs to stay in isolation for 10 days after the day symptoms began.** After the 10 days of isolation, a child may return to school and/or child care if at least 24 hours have passed since the last fever without the use of fever-reducing medicine and other symptoms have improved. How to find out if an area has a high rate of COVID-19 is discussed in the 'Definition of Terms' section.

- **Anyone with symptoms who 1) has not had any close contact with a person with COVID-19 and 2) has not been in an area with high rates of COVID-19 should stay at home and away from others until fever-free for at least 24 hours** without the use of fever-reducing medicine and other symptoms have improved.

Parents and guardians may find the information, scenarios, and graphics provided below in the section for School and Child Care Personnel helpful for better understanding these recommendations.

*See the 'Definition of Terms' section for the definition of close contact and to see how to find the disease rate in your area.