

October 14, 2020

**To: Superintendents of Public Schools and Independent Schools**

**Re: Updated COVID-19 Guidance for K-12 Back to School**

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Northern Health (NH) would like to take this opportunity to share with Superintendents an update on the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) Public Health Guidance for K-12 schools. You may share the letter with others, as you see fit.

We know that school communities have many questions about the safe resumption of in-class learning in BC, and want to make sure you have the resources you need to find information and advice.

The BCCDC's [COVID-19 Public Health Guidance for K-12 Schools](#) was updated on Friday September 11, 2020. We have received many questions about the recent changes. This letter aims to provide further clarification. Key changes in the most recent version include:

### **A simplified symptom list in the Daily Health Check form**

The daily health check form ([Appendix C](#)) now focuses on key symptoms, which are more likely to be due to COVID-19: fever, chills, cough, difficulty breathing, loss of sense of smell or taste, diarrhea, or nausea and vomiting.

Over time, we have learned that other mild or short-lived symptoms are very common, and in the vast majority of cases, are not caused by COVID-19. Excluding from school everyone who only has mild symptoms, or requiring that they all be tested, would put an unsustainable burden on children, families, and the health care system, but would not contribute significantly to reducing COVID-19 risks in schools. The revised symptom list aims to maintain effective risk reduction, while avoiding unnecessary disruptions.

It is generally unnecessary to stay home from school or seek testing if someone only has other symptoms (such as runny nose, fatigue, or headache), but none of the key symptoms. COVID-19 will generally be very unlikely in these cases.

This tool is primarily intended to assist families in their decision-making. It is not intended to replace or override parents' judgement about whether or not their child is ill and needs assessment. Parental judgement will incorporate more information than can be captured by a standard checklist.

### **New criteria for returning to school after symptoms develop**

Staff and students should be allowed to return to school without health assessment or testing, if they have no fever, and only one of the key symptoms above, and it improves within 24 hours; or, if they have none of the key symptoms. Otherwise, if key symptoms occur (fever, two or more key symptoms, or one key symptom lasting over 24 hours), health assessment is recommended and the

person should not return to school until COVID-19 is ruled out by assessment or testing, or at least 10 days have passed from when symptoms began.

These changes will maintain effective risk reduction, but will allow those who are very unlikely to have COVID-19 to remain in school, and will reduce unnecessary burdens on families and the health care system.

### **Schools no longer required to report when absenteeism exceeds 10%**

Staff and student absences may be for any number of reasons, and public health surveillance for communicable disease activity, including COVID-19, is based on testing, case assessment, and contact follow up. Absenteeism alone, in the absence of any confirmed cases, does not require any unique public health action.

### **New testing procedure for students**

A new [saline gargle](#) test is now available as an alternative to the nasopharyngeal (NP) swab for COVID-19 testing in school-aged children K-12 in certain collection centres.

### **COVID-19 case notification process for schools**

Schools are generally not high-risk locations for transmission of COVID-19, but as long as COVID-19 continues to occur in our communities, occasional cases in schools will also occur. NH will notify the School District, Superintendent, and Principal when the Medical Health Officer determines that a confirmed case of COVID-19 may have exposed others in a school.

Northern Health has added a [School Exposures section](#) to its Public Exposures and Outbreaks web page, where you can find notification information of possible exposures to COVID-19 within schools in the NH region.

These notifications are being made public largely in order to avoid misinformation. A public notification does not mean that most staff and students have been exposed to COVID-19, and it does not mean that most staff and students need to take any specific action. When a school has been notified of a possible exposure, no particular action is recommended to staff or students, except for specific individuals contacted personally by Public Health, who have been identified as close contacts.

### **Answers to questions**

Answers to many questions from schools and families can be found in [the BCCDC Frequently Asked Questions resource for schools](#).

There are many things you can do to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in school settings and in your own community. Please visit the BCCDC website for more information: [www.bccdc.ca](http://www.bccdc.ca).

Finally, we wish to note that the BCCDC guidance document reflects current best practice recommendations from BC's public health leaders; it is not a mandatory policy. Some policy documents and other materials from the Ministry of Education have not yet been updated, following

the most recent revision to public health guidance. If in doubt as to current requirements, please consult with the Ministry of Education.

As always, thank you for your ongoing commitment to helping ensure the health and safety of students and school staff across BC.

In health,



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## Appendix C: [Daily Health Check](#)

### Appendix C: Daily Health Check Example

The following is an example of a daily health check to determine if you should attend school that day.

Daily Health Check			
1. Key Symptoms of Illness*	Do you have any of the following new key symptoms?	CIRCLE ONE	
	Fever	YES	NO
	Chills	YES	NO
	Cough or worsening of chronic cough	YES	NO
	Shortness of breath	YES	NO
	Loss of sense of smell or taste	YES	NO
	Diarrhea	YES	NO
	Nausea and vomiting	YES	NO
2. International Travel	Have you returned from travel outside Canada in the last 14 days?	YES	NO
3. Confirmed Contact	Are you a confirmed contact of a person confirmed to have COVID-19?	YES	NO

If you answered "YES" to one of the questions included under 'Key Symptoms of Illness' (excluding fever), you should stay home for 24 hours from when the symptom started. If the symptom improves, you may return to school when you feel well enough. If the symptom persists or worsens, seek a health assessment.

If you answered "YES" to two or more of the questions included under 'Symptoms of Illness' or you have a fever, seek a health assessment. A health assessment includes calling 8-1-1, or a primary care provider like a physician or nurse practitioner. If a health assessment is required, you should not return to school until COVID-19 has been excluded and your symptoms have improved.

When a COVID-19 test is recommended by the health assessment:

- If the COVID-19 test is positive, you should stay home until you are told by public health to end self-isolation. In most cases this is 10 days after the onset of symptoms. Public health will contact everyone with a positive test.
- If the COVID-19 test is negative, you can return to school once symptoms have improved and you feel well enough. Symptoms of common respiratory illnesses can persist for a week or more. Re-testing is not needed unless you develop a new illness.
- If a COVID-19 test is recommended but is not done because you choose not to have the test, or you do not seek a health assessment when recommended, and your symptoms are not related to a previously diagnosed health condition, you should stay home from school until 10 days after the onset of symptoms, and then you may return if you are feeling well enough.

If a COVID-19 test is not recommended by the health assessment, you can return to school when symptoms improve and you feel well enough. Testing may not be recommended if the assessment determines that the symptoms are due to another cause (i.e. not COVID-19).

If you answered "YES" to questions 2 or 3, use the [COVID-19 Self-Assessment Tool](#) to determine if you should seek testing for COVID-19.

A health-care provider note (i.e. a doctor's note) should not be required to confirm the health status of any individual.



Ministry of Health



BC Centre for Disease Control

If you have fever, a new cough, or are having difficulty breathing, call 8-1-1.

