

Southern Berkshire Public Health Collaborative

Serving Alford, Great Barrington, Lee, Lenox, Monterey, Mount Washington, New Marlborough, Otis, Sheffield, and Stockbridge

Common Questions When a Staff Member Tests Positive:

Q: My employee tested positive. Do I need to shut my site down?

A: Probably not, unless the majority of your staff are unvaccinated and were in close contact with the positive individual while they were infectious. If that is the case, those staff members will likely need to quarantine, which may make it difficult to operate as usual. The same may be true if most of your patrons were in close contact and are unvaccinated (such as preschoolers), since they will need to quarantine for at least 7 days.

Q: My employee tested positive. Do I need to sanitize my entire facility?

A: No. Usual, regular cleaning is sufficient. Transmission of the virus from contact with contaminated surfaces has proven to be extremely rare.

Q: My employee tested positive. I'm not sure who else was exposed. How do I know?

A: 1) Find out what day the person first started having symptoms and the day they tested positive. Whichever one came first is their "Day 0". Count backward 48 hours to determine when they started being infectious. 2) Confirm whether they were onsite during those 48 hours, or anytime afterward for the next 10 days after their test or symptoms began. This is the full window of time when they could have been at work while contagious. Infected individuals and those exposed may visit <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/tips-to-make-covid-19-isolation-and-quarantine-easier> to have their questions answered.

Q: I have confirmed my employee was at work while contagious. What next?

A: Figure out exactly who was in close contact with them – this may be employees who worked near them on the same shift and/or patrons they served. Determine whether any of those interactions occurred: 1) indoors, 2) within 6 feet of each other, and 3) lasted 15 minutes or more (total, not necessarily 15 minutes in a row). All 3 criteria must be met for an exposure to be considered close contact. Note: Although masks help reduce transmission, whether masks were worn during exposure is not part of the close contact criteria.

Q: If an employee was infectious while at work, do I need to notify all my patrons?

A: It depends. If the service you provide involved close contact between the staff member and your patrons (hair salon or beautician, massage or physical therapy) or you know your patrons are unvaccinated (preschoolers), you should provide notification to the best of your ability. Casual, short-term interactions (retail sales, bank teller or check-in desk, etc.) are unlikely to meet the definition of close contact. See above for close contact criteria.

Q: I figured out which staff were in close contact with the infectious person. Now what?

A: Determine if any of those exposed people are not fully vaccinated. Fully vaccinated means they got both shots (Pfizer or Moderna) or one J&J shot at least 14 days before their exposure. If you do not know or they do not tell you, they will need to be given quarantine and testing guidance. This guidance only applies to people who are not fully vaccinated AND interacted indoors with the infectious person within 6 feet for 15 minutes or more.

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Common Questions When a Staff Member Tests Positive, cont'd:

Q: What is the quarantine and testing guidance for a close contact who is not fully vaccinated?

A: There are 3 possibilities. The shortest one is a total of 7 days at home. They will need to stay home and get a rapid or PCR test on the 5th day or later after their exposure. If they were exposed on Monday, they should get on Saturday or later for the most accurate result. If the result is negative and they do not have any new, unexplained symptoms, they may exit quarantine on Tuesday, the 8th day. Once out of quarantine, they may return to work, school, the grocery store, etc. They should watch for any new symptoms for one more week and get a repeat test if any appear. More information can be found on <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-isolation-and-quarantine-information>.

Q: What are the other quarantine possibilities?

A: If the person cannot or will not test on the 5th day or later, they must stay home for 10 days. If no new, unexplained symptoms appear during that time, they may leave quarantine on the 11th day. If any new symptoms appear that are not explained by another illness, they must stay home a total of 14 days, even if they get tested again and the result is negative. This is to account for the possibility of a false negative, and to protect others in the community.

Q: Should my positive employee provide a negative test result or a letter from a public health official clearing them before they can return to work?

A: No. Anyone who has tested positive for COVID may continue to test positive for weeks or months following their infectious period – remnants of the virus may be detected, but this does not mean they are still contagious. Only those hospitalized with severe COVID-19 symptoms have been found to be infectious for longer than 10 days. Anyone at the end of their isolation period should check their temperature before returning to work – they should be at least 24 hours without a temperature 100.0 or above without the use of an anti-fever medication before leaving isolation. If an employer requires their COVID-infected staff to stay out longer for any particular reason, the employee should be compensated for that time. Public health officials are no longer providing employers with a letter clearing an individual from isolation or quarantine. It is sufficient for infected staff to complete a 10-day isolation and exposed staff to complete a 7-14 day quarantine, depending on circumstances.

Q: Do I need to notify my local health department if an employee or patron tests positive?

A: No. As of May 29, 2021 when all state COVID-19 business restrictions were lifted, there was no longer a requirement for businesses to report single positive cases to the local Board of Health in Massachusetts. However, if you discover multiple cases at your site within 2 weeks, please notify us so we can investigate a possible cluster at the site. Furthermore, as of December 8, 2021, local public health officials in the person's town of residence are no longer required to follow up with every COVID-positive individual to provide isolation and quarantine guidance. Individuals are encouraged to review the guidance posted on the MA Department of Health website if they have questions about what to do.

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Common Questions When a Staff Member Tests Positive, cont'd:

Q: I'm still worried about the spread of COVID-19 at my worksite. What can I do?

A: The most effective things you can do to prevent transmission and keep your worksite running smoothly are to mandate full vaccination, encourage boosters after 6 months, and require everyone to wear a mask indoors. If time off is an issue for your staff, you can also provide paid leave for vaccination and recovery from possible side effects – see below to find out if that cost can be compensated. Note: Anyone who is 6 months past their second Pfizer or Moderna shot or 2 months past their J&J shot is strongly encouraged to receive a COVID booster, as both vaccine- and infection-derived immunity to the COVID-19 virus have been shown to wane over time. Vaccinated individuals are still less likely to be infected than unvaccinated individuals after an exposure, but it's better to boost that protection, especially for public-facing workers. Appointments may be made online at local vaccine clinics, pharmacies and hospitals. Appointments may also be found using <http://vaxfinder.mass.gov> and <http://getvaccinatedberkshires.org>.

Q: Can I be compensated for providing paid leave time to my employees related to COVID-19?

A: Possibly. The MA Temporary Emergency Paid Sick Leave Program is in operation through April 2022. Please visit <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-temporary-emergency-paid-sick-leave-program> to learn more.