

Memo

TO: All School Principals

FROM: Dr. John Cuddihy, Acting HSE National Clinical Director of Health Protection

RE: Return to school guidance from HSE Public Health

DATE: 04/01/2022

As schools reopen in 2022, it is important that we continue and renew our focus on the public health measures that will help your school communities to stay as safe as possible during the coming year. COVID-19 vaccination uptake in adults, in Ireland is one of the highest globally. This high uptake helps protect those most vulnerable and also very significantly reduces the harm associated with Covid-19 infection for those who are fully vaccinated and boosted.

However, we still need to work together to ensure we continue with all measures to best control Covid-19 in schools and that we minimise the onward spread of Covid-19 within schools, and our communities. The infection prevention and control (IPC) measures in place in schools have helped to prevent and control Covid-19 in schools. These measures have been reviewed and updated in light of the emergence of the omicron variant.

Infection prevention and Control Measures:

1) Before attending school:

Symptoms – Please make sure all staff and families are aware not to attend school if they have any symptoms of Covid-19 infection.

Symptom profiles are available here [[symptoms](#)] and we advise parents to take a precautionary approach, particularly for children less able to articulate their symptoms, that if a child appears unwell, observe them at home and contact their GP as appropriate.

Close contacts - Please remind all staff and children that if they have been told by the HSE services that they are a close contact of a case of Covid-19, they need to adhere to the advice on the HSE website in relation to restricted movements and testing. Children under 13 years who are household close contacts must restrict their movements for 14 days and they are offered PCR testing at day 0 and day 10. On receipt of a day 10 not-detected PCR test result, they may exit restricted movements. It is important that anyone who has been identified as a close contact, is very aware of COVID-19 symptoms, and isolate and undergo testing should they develop any symptoms.

2) Re-enforcing general public health messages

In addition to ensuring that staff and children do not attend school if they have any symptoms of Covid-19 infection, please ensure all staff and children are reminded of the importance of abiding by the national public health measures currently in place at all times e.g. vaccination (including boosters), social distancing, use of face masks, hand hygiene, ventilation and minimising social contacts.

3) What to do when a confirmed case of Covid-19 arises that is connected with the school:

It is inevitable that cases of Covid-19 will arise in schools when they reopen, just as they are currently arising in the community. It is recommended that schools implement the infection prevention and control measures above.

There are some key messages that you need to remember when cases arise:

Classes do not need to be sent home or told not to come in to school.

When multiple cases of Covid-19 arise in a class or school, those cases should be excluded and the children in the same pod as the case are offered antigen tests. If there is a second case outside the pod of the first case, all children and staff in the class are offered antigen tests. Those children and staff do not need to be excluded from school unless they develop symptoms or have a positive antigen test.

Other than adhering to these actions in relation to Covid-19 cases, there is no Public Health reason that you need to exclude a whole class or to close a school.

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

If the case was not in the school setting whilst infectious, then the school will not need to take any action because there is no significant risk that the case has spread the infection in the school setting. 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.

HSE live Covid-19 Principal school line and Public Health support

For specific queries relating to confirmed cases of Covid-19 within your setting, please continue to use the '**HSE live Covid-19 Principal school line**' on **(01) 240 8785**. 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 and will be able to deal with school queries.

Some complex queries may be forwarded by the HSE Live Covid-19 Principal line to the Departments of Public Health. Each Public Health Department will have designated clinical staff to respond to queries that are escalated from the principals' line. Departments of Public Health work to a nationally agreed prioritisation of settings in which Covid cases or outbreaks occur e.g. special schools are among the high priority settings as are nursing homes.

For Covid-19 related education queries the Department of Education can be contacted by email Covid19_alert@education.gov.ie or on 057 9324461.

Further information can be found at:

<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/educationguidance/>

<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/covid19/>

For education specific guidance, please see:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/a128d-back-to-school/>

I am sure it will be a busy return to school, as it usually is for yourselves, and it is also a very busy time for Public Health, so we appreciate your patience and cooperation with the teams contacting you.

Best regards,



Dr. John Cuddihy,
Acting National Clinical Director of Health Protection,
HSE.