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COVID-19 FAQs for Families of School-Aged Children

COVID 101

What are the best ways to prevent getting COVID?
The virus that causes COVID spreads through the air. If you breath in virus particles that someone with COVID has breathed out, you can get infected. This means that wearing a high-quality, well-fitting mask, like a KN95, when you are around other people, especially when you are indoors, is one of the most effective ways to prevent infection. Masks can prevent an infected person from spreading the virus, as well as prevent a healthy person from becoming infected. Gathering with people outdoors or in well-ventilated indoor spaces can also reduce your risk of infection. Staying up to date with recommended COVID vaccine doses, including boosters, is also really important. While vaccinated people can still get COVID, the risk of infection is lower, and the risk of severe illness is significantly lower.

How serious is getting COVID for kids?
While the risk of serious COVID illness is greater in older adults and people with medical conditions, COVID can cause serious illness and death in children. In California, one-third of the children and youth who have died from COVID-19 had no underlying medical condition. Even children with no symptoms or mild symptoms can develop MIS-C, which is a potentially serious illness where many internal organs become inflamed. As with adults, vaccination significantly lowers children's risk of severe illness and death.

COVID Positive People

What do I do if my child has COVID symptoms? What do I if my child tests positive for COVID?
The most important thing to do is keep your child home and get them tested, even if your child has had COVID before. If you use a home antigen test, make sure to read the instructions on the box. Often, you need to test again 1 to 2 days later if the first test is negative. It's not unusual for someone with COVID to test negative during the first day or two of symptoms. You do NOT need to confirm a positive test.
If your child does test positive, they need to isolate for at least 5 days. To leave isolation before 10 days, they should test again on Day 6 or later. If that test is negative, they can leave isolation but should wear a mask when around others for the full 10 days. They should also be fever-free for at least 24 hours and have improving symptoms before returning to school.

Exposure to COVID

What do I do if my child is exposed to someone in my household, at school or in the community who has COVID?
Alameda County does not require people who have been exposed to COVID to quarantine any longer, but there are still things you should do:
1. Your child should wear a mask when around others for 10 days after the last day of exposure. If your child was exposed in the community and there is someone at high-risk for serious illness in the household, the child should mask at home as well.
2. If your child develops symptoms, they should test right away and isolate if the test is positive.
3. If your child never develops symptoms, they should still test 3 to 5 days after their last exposure. If the exposure is ongoing, such as in a household where the infected person cannot isolate, you may want to test your child every few days.

If your child is exposed to COVID at school, they should follow any additional guidance provided by the school.

What happens if someone in my child's household is exposed to someone with COVID?
Anyone who has been exposed should wear a mask when around others for 10 days after the last day of exposure. This is especially important when there is someone at high-risk for serious illness in the household. If the exposed person develops symptoms, they should test right away and isolate if the test is positive. Even if they never develop symptoms, they should still test 3 to 5 days after their last exposure. If the person tests positive, that means your child is now exposed and should mask for 10 days and test on day 3 to 5.

Testing

Does testing still work for these new COVID variants? When should my child use a home antigen test? When should my child use a PCR test? When do I need to confirm my child's home test result?
Yes, the tests still work! You can use COVID tests with or without symptoms. Antigen tests can miss some infections, especially in the first few days of symptoms or if your child is asymptomatic. However, they have the benefit of providing results in 15 minutes, and you can reduce the chance of missing an infection by doing a second test 1 to 2 days after the first. Always follow the instructions on the box about repeat testing! A positive home antigen test means that your child has a COVID-19 infection, and a confirmation test isn't needed.
PCR tests are more sensitive, meaning they are less likely to miss an infection, but your child would need to go to a testing provider and then wait a day or 2 for results. A PCR test can be especially helpful if your child is exposed and symptomatic but is testing negative by antigen test.
When do you recommend testing (i.e. after exposure, when symptomatic, after testing positive)?
Anyone who develops symptoms of COVID-19 should test right away and isolate if positive. You should also test 3 to 5 days after your last exposure and isolate if positive, even if you don't have any symptoms. If you have COVID-19 and want to leave isolation before 10 days have passed, you can test on Day 6 or later. If that test is negative, you can leave isolation and wear a mask through Day 10.
Why are we testing kids before they go back to school?
Anyone who has symptoms of COVID-19 should test right away. But, some kids never have symptoms when they are infected. Testing all kids before returning to school reduces the risk that infected students will come to school when they have COVID-19.
Where can I get free home tests?
At-home COVID-19 self-tests provide rapid results and can be taken anywhere, regardless of your vaccination status or whether you have symptoms. Here are some ways you can obtain free at-home self-tests.
1. [Order from the U.S Federal government through USPS.](#)
2. Medicare members can visit [Medicare.gov](#) for participating pharmacies and present your Medicare ID card at the pharmacy counter.
3. Medi-Cal member may contact [Medi-Cal Rx to locate an in-network pharmacy](#) to obtain an at-home test at no cost. See details on the [State Medi-Cal website for how to submit a claim](#).
4. Your health care/insurance provider is required to offer a certain number of free tests monthly or [reimburse](#) for those tests. Tests may also be FSA/HSA-eligible. Contact your health care or insurance provider to learn more.
   - [Anthem Blue Cross](#)
   - [Blue Shield of California](#)
   - [Healthnet](#) (Under "At-Home COVID-19 Tests")
   - [Kaiser Permanente Testing Information](#)
   - [Sutter Health](#)

Masks

What is Mask Season? When should my child wear a mask?
Mask Season is a way of thinking about the need for masking depending on how much COVID is circulating in the community. We're used to thinking about activities in terms of times of year, whether it be a favorite sport, event or holiday. We talk about "allergy season" as trees and flowers bloom in the spring or leaves fall in autumn. We deal with "wildfire smoke season" in the late summer/fall as well as "cold and flu season" in the winter. We take different actions or adjust habits during these seasons, such as taking allergy medication, staying inside when it's smoky, or getting a flu shot and washing our hands. Right now, we are the in the middle

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of a COVID surge, and masks remain strongly recommended for everyone in Alameda County in indoor public spaces, including schools. It is definitely Mask Season!

What types of masks do you recommend? Does the type of mask your child wears matter?
We know that high quality masks like KN95's are more effective at blocking virus particles than surgical masks or cloth masks. It is also important that a mask be well-fitting so that there are no spaces between the mask and the face, and it fits comfortably over the nose and under the chin. A cloth mask is better than no mask, especially if it has at least 3 layers, but the higher quality masks do provide the best protection against getting or transmitting COVID-19. While N95's might fit adolescents, KN95 and KF94s are both available in "child" or "extra-small" sizes, making them a good option for children.
For more information, please see: https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/COVID-19/Get-the-Most-out-of-Masking.aspx

Cleaning

How important is cleaning surfaces for preventing the spread of COVID?
The virus that causes COVID-19 can land on surfaces. It's possible for people to become infected if they touch those surfaces and then touch their nose, mouth, or eyes. In most situations, the risk of infection from touching a surface is low. The most reliable way to prevent infection from surfaces is to regularly wash hands with soap and water or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces can also reduce the risk of infection. However, COVID-19 is primarily spread through the air, so prevention measures such as masking and improving ventilation are much more important than cleaning surfaces.

Vaccines

How effective are the COVID-19 vaccines?
The COVID-19 vaccines are **very** effective at preventing severe disease, hospitalization and death. While you can still get infected, especially if it's been a few months since your last dose, protection against serious disease has remained high even as new variants have emerged. Because there is some waning of immunity over time, it's important to stay up to date on booster doses.
For more information about COVID-19 vaccine recommendations, please see:
https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/downloads/COVID-19-vacc-schedule-at-a-glance-508.pdf

Are the COVID-19 vaccines safe for kids?
The COVID-19 vaccines have been closely studied and found to be safe and effective for children and teens ages 6 months and older. Since authorization by the FDA, over 200,000 Alameda County children and youth have received at least one dose of their primary vaccine series. Serious adverse events after COVID-19 vaccination are rare, and both the FDA and the CDC have determined that the benefits of the vaccine far outweigh the risks. The risk of severe disease, hospitalization, or death from COVID-19 in persons who are not up to date on vaccination is much greater than any risk of serious side effects from the vaccines.
The CDC did recently update its recommendations to allow up to 8 weeks between doses of Pfizer and Moderna for certain persons, such as males ages 12 to 17 years due to the small risk of myocarditis after receiving these vaccines. This longer interval between doses may also increase vaccine effectiveness. For some children and youth, such as those who are immunocompromised or who have certain medical conditions, a longer time between first and second doses may not be recommended. Talk with your child's healthcare provider if you have questions about when your child should get their second dose.

What are possible side effects of vaccination?
After getting a COVID-19 vaccine, children and youth may have some side effects, such as:

- Sore arm
- Feeling tired for a day or two
- Muscle aches or headache
- Low grade fever
- Chills
- Upset stomach

Most side effects are mild and will go away in a few days. Side effects can be more intense after the second shot in the primary series than after the first. Side effects happen as the body is building protection against the virus, but they should go away in a few days. If side effects do not improve, contact your child's healthcare provider.

Can I wait to get my child vaccinated until the vaccine has been around for longer?
There has never been a vaccine where we learned about side effects long after the vaccine was given. Side effects show up fairly quickly with vaccines, and COVID-19 vaccines have now been around for 18 months with over 200 million people vaccinated in the United States alone. Our safety monitoring systems are designed to pick up adverse events in real time, so that researchers can figure out whether there's a connection between reports of side effects and the vaccines. Waiting to get your child vaccinated risks severe illness, MIS-C (a potentially serious illness where many internal organs become inflamed after an infection) and long-COVID, which is another name for symptoms that linger for weeks after an infection. Serious adverse events after COVID-19 vaccination are rare, and both the FDA and the CDC have determined that the benefits of the vaccine far outweigh the risks.

If kids have a lower risk of getting seriously ill with COVID-19, why should they get vaccinated?
There's no way to know whether your child will get severely ill with COVID-19 or develop MIS-C (a potentially serious illness where many internal organs become inflamed after an infection). Thirty percent of kids who are hospitalized with COVID have no underlying medical conditions. One way to think about this is the way we think about car safety. We put our kids in car seats or seatbelts because we have no idea, on a given day, if we're going to get into an accident. We probably won't, but we might, and the data is clear that the chance of your child surviving a car accident or not being seriously injured is significantly greater if they are buckled up. We don't feel regret at having bought a car seat if we're never in an accident, because we know we made the best choice to protect our child *just in case*. I vaccinated my own children for the same reason. I can't see into the future and wanted to do everything I could to reduce their risk of serious illness.

If my child has had COVID-19, do they still need to be vaccinated, or boosted?
The CDC recommends that children and adolescents ages 6 months and older get vaccinated, and boosted if eligible, even if they've had COVID-19. Different people develop differing levels of immunity to an infection, and current antibody tests can't tell us how protected someone is after having COVID-19. Because we have a lot of data on vaccine safety and effectiveness, vaccines are still the best choice for preventing serious COVID-19 illness.