

CDC Updates Timeline for COVID-19 Quarantines

Also, OSHA to clarify when employers must report cases

By Nancy Cleeland

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has updated guidance for how long employees should be quarantined at home after testing positive for COVID-19, reducing the time from 14 to 10 days (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/disposition-in-home-patients.html>) in most cases.

The new timeline reflects evolving information about the coronavirus and its infectious period, the CDC said. "Researchers have reported that people with mild to moderate COVID-19 remain infectious no longer than 10 days after their symptoms began, and those with more severe illness or those who are severely immunocompromised remain infectious no longer than 20 days after their symptoms began."

Deciding when to end home isolation should be based on symptoms rather than testing, the updated guidance advised, listing this timeline:

- Those who tested positive but never develop symptoms can end isolation after 10 days.
- Those who tested positive and have moderate to mild symptoms can end isolation after 10 days if at least 24 hours have passed without a fever and other symptoms have improved.
- Those who tested positive and have severe illness may need to continue isolation for a full 20 days.
- Those who were exposed to the virus but were never tested and have no symptoms should continue to quarantine for the full 14 days.

The CDC noted that under the new rules, "it is possible that a person known to be infected [through testing] could leave isolation earlier than a person who is quarantined because of the possibility they are infected."

SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Coronavirus and COVID-19 (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/communicable-diseases.aspx)

Use Symptoms, Not Testing, to Decide

Testing should be used to end quarantine in limited circumstances only, and, in those cases, two tests should be administered at least 24 hours apart to ensure accuracy, the CDC said.

Travis Vance, a partner with Fisher Phillips based in Charlotte, N.C., said he has advised clients from the beginning of the pandemic not to require a negative COVID-19 test for a return to work, in part because it's an inconvenience to employees and can take a week or longer to get results.

Also, tests can show positive results long after the contagious period ends. That raises additional questions for employers. For example, should the quarantine period be restarted after a positive test? Employers that follow the symptom-based approach described by the CDC rather than requiring a clear test result to return to work can avoid those questions, Vance said.

[SHRM members-only HR form: COVID-19 Employee Self-Certification to Return to Work (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/Pages/COVID-19-Employee-Self-Certification-to-Return-to-Work.aspx)]

Another question that comes up for employers: If an employee was exposed to the coronavirus but tests negative for it, can he or she return to work? The answer is no, Vance said, because tests can fail to detect the virus in the first days of infection. Employees should continue to isolate for 14 days, he said. If the result is positive, the employee must isolate for 10 days from the time of the test.

The CDC applies an exemption to the 14-day quarantine in the case of employees in critical infrastructure. They may return to work after exposure to COVID-19 if they have no symptoms, wear a mask, monitor for symptoms and stay socially distanced from other employees.

Vance advised employers to subscribe to CDC e-mail alerts to stay on top of changes to guidance as the agency continues to learn about the coronavirus.

OSHA to Revise Reporting FAQs

Meanwhile, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is revising its guidance on when employers should report or record COVID-19 illnesses among employees.

In late July, the agency removed from its website six frequently asked questions (FAQs) about when an employee case of COVID-19 should be considered work-related and when fatalities and hospitalizations should be reported to the agency.

A Department of Labor (DOL) spokesperson said the agency "is working to make the FAQs clearer for the stakeholder community" and did not know when new questions and answers would be posted.

In general, employers must report a COVID-19 case to OSHA only when the infection is work-related and an employee is hospitalized within 24 hours or dies within 30 days of leaving work, according to Vance.

"It's almost never reportable to OSHA, only recordable on the OSHA 300 logs," Vance said.

Employers generally must record COVID-19 cases that were contracted at work on the injury and illness logs that are maintained and, in some cases, submitted to OSHA annually, he said.

OSHA also added two new FAQs (<https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/covid-19/covid-19-faq.html#collapse49>) on face masks clarifying that the agency supports the use of face masks at work and that face masks are safe to wear.

"Like medical masks, cloth face coverings are loose-fitting with no seal and are designed to be breathed through," OSHA wrote. "In addition, workers may easily remove their medical masks or cloth face coverings periodically (and when not in close proximity with others) to eliminate any negligible build-up of carbon dioxide that might occur. Cloth face coverings and medical masks can help prevent the spread of potentially infectious respiratory droplets from the wearer to their co-workers, including when the wearer has COVID-19 and does not know it."

[How have you adapted to the pandemic? Share your story with SHRM's Government Affairs team

(<https://shrm.formstack.com/forms/resiliency>) as they educate decision-makers on crafting policies on work, workers and the workplace.]

Related SHRM articles:

Contact Tracing for Employers (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/contact-tracing-employers.aspx),
SHRM Online, June 2, 2020

CDC Issues Guidance on Testing Employees for COVID-19 (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/cdc-testing-guidance.aspx), *SHRM Online*, July 17, 2020

CDC Guidance Reiterates Importance of Cloth Face Masks (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/cdc-guidance-update.aspx), *SHRM Online*, July 6, 2020

CDC Issues Guidance for Reopening Office Buildings (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/cdc-office-opening-guidance.aspx), *SHRM Online*, May 31, 2020

CDC Releases Comprehensive Coronavirus Guidance (https://shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/new-cdc-covid-guidance.aspx?_ga=2.79770839.1533316251.1596391188-2001400392.1582295686), *SHRM Online*, May 21, 2020

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