



MCCHD Guidance for Employers

What to Expect if a Staff Member Tests Positive for COVID-19

We've created this guidance document to help employers and businesses understand what typically happens when an employee tests positive for COVID-19 or has been exposed to COVID-19.

We've heard concerns from local businesses about what they need to do to protect their staff and our fellow Missoulians if a staff member tests positive for COVID-19. This document is meant to help navigate that process.

As with all things related to COVID-19, the answer is not cut and dry. The course of action each individual business will take will depend on several factors such as:

- When the sick staff person worked,
- With whom they had close contact*, and
- In what areas of the business they routinely worked.
 - *The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines a close contact as anyone that has been within 6 feet or less from someone for 15 minutes or more; minutes can be cumulative.

Once a case has been identified, employers will need to consider:

- Whether they have enough remaining staff to operate,
- What additional cleaning and sanitizing is needed, and
- Whether they should notify the public about the case.

Case investigators will talk with employers throughout this process to help them make informed decisions that best meet their needs, while also promoting public health and safety.

What to Expect if a Staff Member Tests Positive for COVID-19

1. Prevention is the Best Medicine.

Doing as much as you can to limit possible exposure routes in your business can make the difference regarding how many people are potentially affected if an employee tests positive for COVID-19. This includes the following preventative measures, which have been and continue being available in prior MCCHD COVID-19 guidance documents:

- Pre-shift health checks,
- Ensuring staff who have symptoms (even mild symptoms!) stay home,
- Ensuring employees stay 6 feet away from all other people,
- Reducing the number of times staff must come within 6 feet of all other people,
- Creative scheduling such as:
 - Having the same staff always work together*
 - Not intermingling same-shift staff with other shifts*
 - When possible, allowing staff to work remotely*
 - *These strategies help keep an individual's social circle small, which includes their professional and personal contacts. The smaller the social circle, the fewer the potential close contacts if/when there is an active case.
- Requiring face coverings for everyone in the business, including areas that are not open to the public and are for staff only, and
- Increased cleaning and sanitation of all common-touch areas of the business.

2. What to expect if a staff member has symptoms and is being tested for COVID-19.

- A person who has symptoms and is tested for COVID-19 is required to quarantine until they get their test results. Test results are typically returned within 72 hours, but some tests can take up to 2 weeks or more. Currently, reporting results and subsequent patient notification is taking longer than anticipated. This is not an issue specific to Montana, but rather is the trend across the US in general.
 - Quarantine means staying inside, at home, without leaving the property for the entirety of the quarantine. People who are quarantined cannot go to work, the grocery store, hike in the woods, or lounge by the community pool.
 - If the result is negative for a symptomatic individual, then the staff member can return to work after infectious symptoms subside.

- **If a staff member is a close contact to a positive case, they will still have to quarantine for the entire 14-day post-exposure period, regardless of a negative test result.**
- If a person who has symptoms of COVID-19 tests positive for COVID-19, see #3 below.

3. What to expect if a staff member tests positive for COVID-19.

- If the result is positive, the Health Department is automatically notified by the lab. A Health Department case investigator will interview the person who is sick and will give them an official Order to Isolate.
- The case investigator identifies those people who were in close contact with the staff member when they were contagious, including two days before symptoms appeared (or 2 days before the test if the person never had symptoms.)
- The case investigator also asks the person positive for COVID-19 to tell their employer of the situation.
- Case investigators must follow state and federal laws regarding disclosing personal medical information, so they are careful about talking with employers about a positive case.
- Ideally, the staff member will also give the case investigator permission to speak freely with the employer. This helps the case investigator further investigate possible contacts and make sure that necessary precautions are taken to reduce the spread of COVID-19 within the business environment, as well in the general community. If the person that tests positive for COVID-19 does not grant permission, the case investigator will still contact the employer, but will have to speak in more general terms.

4. What to expect if there are close contacts to a positive case associated with your establishment.

It is not uncommon for coworkers to be considered close contacts, depending on how staff interact inside and outside of the workplace. All close contacts identified by the case investigator are quarantined for 14 days from their last exposure to the person positive for COVID-19.

- **Quarantine means staying inside, at home, without leaving the property for the entirety of the quarantine.** People who are quarantined cannot go to work, the grocery store, hike in the woods, or lounge by the community pool.
- A close contact is someone who:

- Was within 6 feet or less of the positive person for at least 15 minutes when they may have been contagious. That time is cumulative, meaning that multiple shorter duration exposures can also qualify someone as a close contact.
- Examples include:
 - Provided direct care at home to someone positive with COVID-19
 - Had direct physical contact with someone with COVID-19 (touched, hugged, etc.)
 - Shared eating or drinking utensils with someone positive for COVID-19
 - Was sneezed or coughed upon by someone positive for COVID-19
- Wearing cloth face coverings reduces the potential spread of COVID-19 and the number of additional cases that might come from a single positive case. However, if a person meets any of the above criteria, they will be considered a close contact, regardless of whether or when cloth face coverings were worn. The benefit of a cloth face covering is that it shores up safety within the environment, especially when it is used in conjunction with other safe behaviors and practices.
- CDC notes that there is emerging evidence from clinical and laboratory studies that shows cloth face coverings reduce the spray of droplets when worn over the nose and mouth, preventing the droplets from traveling through the air and onto other people.
- Close contacts are quarantined for 14 days after their last exposure to the person with COVID-19. While a close contact may be tested during the quarantine, a negative test will not shorten their quarantine.
 - WHY: If you are tested as a close contact, and the test is negative, that doesn't mean you won't become infected during the 14-day incubation period of COVID-19. This just means you are not positive at the time of the test. Close contacts are tested because if they come back positive, case investigators can connect with and quarantine their close contacts earlier, preventing them from spreading the disease to others.

5. What to expect when staff return to work.

A staff member cannot return to work until released by the Health Department. Typically, the employee will receive a letter from the Health Department releasing them from isolation. Employers can request a copy of this letter from the staff member.

- CDC guidance requires that an employee isolate at home until:
 - At least 72 hours have passed since their fever returned to normal without the use of fever-reducing medications AND their respiratory symptoms (cough, shortness of breath, etc.) have improved, AND

- At least 10 days have passed since symptoms first appeared.

6. What to expect if a staff member has potentially been exposed to someone with COVID-19. A contact of a contact is not a contact. What that means is that if one of your staff has been around someone who is quarantined as a close contact, but who has not yet tested positive for COVID, OR if they've been around someone who is being tested for COVID-19, that staff person is not required to quarantine or be absent from work. However, it is absolutely essential for the business to follow all the requirements and recommendations that reduce the spread of COVID-19 (See Section 1).

7. What to expect if there is a positive case at a business, licensed establishment, etc.

Closing Temporarily:

Whether a business must temporarily close when one or more staff test positive for COVID-19 is based on the specific situation.

- In some situations, a temporary closure is needed to complete additional cleaning and sanitization.
- In other cases, a business may not have enough staff to operate because a significant percentage of staff had to be quarantined. These closures are usually done voluntarily by the business after consulting with the case investigator.

Required Cleaning:

The Health Department relies on the CDC for guidance on cleaning. That guidance can be found here: [Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility](#). One thing to note, however, is that even if the staff member has not been in the building for 7 days, if any of the co-worker's close contacts have worked within the last 7 days, the additional cleaning and sanitizing is needed.

Notifying the Public:

- The Health Department only makes a public announcement of a known COVID-19 case at a business if needed to identify additional close contacts, or if it will allow customers to take steps to protect themselves, friends, and family.
- The decision is based on what type and how much contact staff had with the public, during the potentially contagious period.
- The Health Department will let the business know of the decision before announcing it to the public. It usually works best when the business and the Health Department can cooperate and coordinate the message and timing.



- The Health Department will not identify the employee when making such an announcement.
- Some businesses choose to tell their customers even when the Health Department does not require it.