The Ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic
Question and Answer for the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services (DBHIDS) Provider Network
January 21, 2022

This question-and-answer document was prepared in response to frequently asked questions and provider concerns expressed at the DBHIDS Provider Town Hall held on January 21, 2022.
Please be sure to [view the recording](#) of the DBHIDS Provider Town Hall with Dr. Bettigole, Health Commissioner, to stay informed.

General COVID-19 Updates

It can be very challenging to navigate the mass amounts of information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, and information is updated constantly. One of the roles of the Philadelphia Department of Public Health is to navigate federal guidance and interpret for local conditions.
Please visit [phila.gov/programs/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/updates/the-latest-news](#) to access the latest news regarding COVID-19 and the situation in Philadelphia. This website includes the number of COVID-19 cases, overall risk, latest testing data, and latest vaccine data. You can also text COVIDPHL to 888-777 to receive updates on your phone. You can also access the Health Department's call center at 215-685-5488.

Questions regarding testing

When is the best time to test for COVID-19 after an exposure?
One of the most common mistakes is after a person has an exposure, they immediately run out to test. You will likely be negative immediately after exposure. Whether or not you are vaccinated, you should get tested five days after your exposure if you remain asymptomatic. If you become symptomatic get tested immediately. If you are not up to date on your vaccinations, treat yourself like you are contagious during that wait. If you have had confirmed covid within the last 90 days, get tested only if you develop symptoms.

Why is the Philadelphia testing mandate for unvaccinated health care workers with documented exemption twice per week as opposed to once per week? Will this mandate be modified to align with the federal testing mandate of once per week?
Healthcare workers with an exemption will be required to have a PCR test or an antigen test twice per week and double-mask. Tests are mandated twice weekly because people can become contagious over a period of days once they have become infected. It can take several days between the infection and

when someone tests positive. Testing twice per week lowers the odds of a healthcare worker putting the individuals served at risk of infection among vulnerable communities.

Are there plans for free COVID-19 Vaccine Tests to be shared with local community-based organizations to distribute among the high-risk communities we serve?
Yes, the Health Department is currently trying to secure a large supply of free COVID-19 testing. As you are aware, the supply of rapid testing has been a challenge during the Omicron surge. When supply becomes available to the Health Department, we will post a link so that community-based organizations can apply to get a limited supply of tests. We hope to distribute the tests equitably throughout vulnerable communities.
In the interim, the federal government is distributing four free test kits per household. Please visit covidtests.gov to assist your clients in registering for their free test kits. Additionally, the Health Department uses the hotline 215-685-5488 to assist people without internet access to order their home tests. You can always find a community-based COVID-19 testing site here.

Home testing kits have expiration dates. Are they still able to be used beyond the expiration date?
If you have a test that is past its expiration date, you can check on the company website or the FDA website to see if there has been an extension on the test kit.

With an increase in at-home testing, how do we know that the positive case numbers are decreasing?
It is true that the more access to at-home tests people have, the less reliable our surveillance data will be. This is a tradeoff that we are willing to make so that people can take a home test to safely visit their grandparents or immunocompromised loved ones. The Health Department continues to monitor COVID-19 through several metrics, including hospitalizations due to COVID-19 and visits to emergency rooms due to COVID-19.

Questions about quarantine and isolation

What is the difference between quarantine and isolation?
Quarantine is when a person is exposed to COVID-19 and takes measures to isolate before testing, regardless of symptoms. Quarantine is an important time to watch for symptoms such as fever, shortness of breath. Consider yourself contagious currently.
Isolation is when a person tests positive for COVID-19 or is experiencing symptoms such as fever, headaches, shortness of breath, cough.

What is the updated guidance for quarantine and isolation in the City of Philadelphia?

Despite the updates issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Philadelphia Department of Public Health maintains a 10-day quarantine and isolation recommendation. About one-third of people remain contagious after five days. This creates challenges for many healthcare workers who don't work from their own private office and share communal spaces to eat or drink. For healthcare settings, quarantine, and isolation for only five days is risky. Further, the updated CDC guidance does not recommend five-day isolation for congregate settings.

In **quarantine**, the ten days should begin the day after the last exposure to a COVID-19 positive person. Individuals should test 5 days after exposure.

In **isolation**, the ten days should begin the day after a person test positive for COVID-19. Please note that you may have been in quarantine for days prior to testing positive due to the incubation period of the virus.

Please see this visual aid for clear guidance on quarantine, isolation, and testing: phila.gov/media/20201119161650/Quarantine-Visual-Aid-.pdf

What happens when a healthcare worker continues to test positive after infection?

This depends on the person, the situation, and what type of test. PCR tests can remain positive for several months. A rapid test shows how much virus a person is carrying and should be negative sooner than a PCR would be. However, immunocompromised people can test positive on rapid tests for much longer. The best guidance is to follow the above isolation guidance after testing positive, remain isolated for ten days. You do not need to retest after ten days of isolation.

For up-to-date information regarding managing personnel with COVID-19 infection or exposure, please refer to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's guidance here.

What is the updated quarantine and isolation guidance for folks in congregate settings?

The quarantine and isolation guidance for congregate settings has not changed. For more information, please refer to the document "COVID-19 Guidance for Homeless Service Providers and non-Healthcare Congregate Living Homes."

The City has been able to increase capacity at the Quarantine and Isolation site to include all 131 rooms on site. The intake process for this facility is staffed from 8:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. and can be accessed by calling 267-396-2712 or submitting a referral online at bit.ly/phliqreferral. A reminder that the Quarantine and Isolation site offers the ability to isolate individuals who are not able to isolate in their home settings but is not a healthcare facility. The person being referred must be able to meet their daily needs on their own (activities of daily living).

What guidance will be provided to intellectual disability residential providers relative to visits with families?
Visitors to congregate care settings are allowed at this time. Masks should be required of visitors and people who are actively symptomatic or feeling sick should not be allowed in. Some area healthcare institutions have gone further to require visitors to be vaccinated. This decision is up to the discretion of the healthcare provider.

Is there a difference in quarantine guidance for vaccinated people versus unvaccinated people?
Yes. Unvaccinated people must quarantine if they have an exposure. People who are fully vaccinated and boosted do not need to quarantine. People who are fully vaccinated and due to get their booster but are NOT boosted must quarantine.

Do fully vaccinated and boosted health care workers who experience an exposure need to quarantine?
At this time, the guidance for healthcare workers who have been exposed to COVID-19 is that they do not need to quarantine but must mask carefully and fully. See masking guidance in this document.

Is natural immunity better than vaccination?
"Natural immunity" refers to the immunity a person can experience after being infected by COVID. While natural immunity may provide protection for up to 90 days, vaccine-induced immunity is more protective for most people.

Questions about vaccination and boosters

If you have had your two vaccination shots and your booster shot how soon will you need to have the second booster shot?
There is no second booster shot at this time. This will be determined in the future as we continue to navigate the ongoing needs to combat the pandemic.
Individuals who are immunocompromised are recommended to receive four shots. They should receive a third dose of the vaccine 28 days after their second, and then a booster dose five months later along with the general population.

Does a healthcare worker with a documented exemption who tests positive for COVID-19 need to continue to follow the testing protocols for exempt staff – testing twice weekly?
COVID-19 positive immunity does not equate to the immunity achieved through vaccination. However, exempt staff who test positive for COVID-19 do not have to adhere to biweekly testing for 90 days from the date of the positive test. They must resume biweekly testing after 90 days.

Will the Philadelphia Department of Public Health add a booster mandate to the vaccine mandate for healthcare workers?
At this time, an additional booster requirement is not being planned. We are currently focused on full implementation of every public health measure already in place.

How long should I wait to receive my booster vaccine after testing positive for COVID?
You should follow the isolation guidance outlined above before receiving your booster dose, but do not need to wait beyond the ten day isolation period.

Questions about masking

What is the updated guidance around masking?
The CDC has issued new guidance that a cloth mask is not enough protection. The gold standard recommended is an N95 mask. However, there have been significant supply chain challenges across the country, and N95 masks can be difficult for some to wear all day long. If you are not able to wear an N95 mask, it is recommended that you double mask. You can wear a cloth mask over a 3-ply surgical mask.

Can I reuse a mask?
Yes, if it's not soiled or wet. Remove the mask using the elastic earpieces and place it somewhere that it can air out, wash your hands. It is a good idea to rotate your masks. You can have three or four masks that you rotate through. This leaves time for the masks to air out. You can use an N95 mask up to five times.

Should I dispose of my N95 mask if I was in contact with a COVID+ client?
No, that is not necessary. You may reuse safely, see above guidance.

Are cloth masks with replaceable HEPA filters any good?
There is not great literature on this, but if you are using a cloth mask with HEPA filter, we still recommend combining it with a surgical mask.

Are providers expected to provide high-quality masks to participants? How are we expected to fund this?
The CDC made this recommendation without any funding or implementation strategies. The federal government is planning to distribute N95 masks like the recent home testing distribution, but the numbers appear to be only one per person.

For any further questions or clarification, please contact
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