

Preventing Respiratory Infections Among Schoolchildren

Considerations for school and child care communities affected by COVID, Influenza, and RSV during 2022-23 Winter

Families and schools can successfully prevent upper respiratory infections (URIs) caused by viruses common in colder months. The sharp rise of influenza and RSV activity in San Mateo County, along with increasing COVID transmission in California, will cause many children to feel ill, with some requiring medical attention. The following considerations can inform school policies, procedures, and communications with their communities.

Which viruses are circulating in San Mateo County?

While COVID transmission is still infecting many people in San Mateo County, there has also been a sharp increase of two other important respiratory viruses – influenza (“High” level in CA) and RSV (Respiratory Syncytial Virus). Other respiratory viruses are typically milder, causing uncomfortable “common cold” respiratory-tract symptoms for 1-2 weeks.

How can we prevent infections and severe disease?

Vaccination with the updated COVID booster and the annual flu vaccine are effective at preventing infections and very effective at preventing severe disease.

Limiting exposure to respiratory droplets is another effective prevention strategy, especially while respiratory viruses are circulating widely.

- Large droplets (carrying influenza, RSV, or COVID virus) can settle onto surfaces and objects and are spread by close contact. Prevention strategies: wash hands, avoid touching your face, cover coughs, and clean surfaces.
- Very small droplets (carrying COVID virus) are exhaled into the air and can travel more than six feet. Prevention strategies: limit the number of people indoors, improve ventilation (opening multiple doors and windows), and wear a mask (N95 mask is the most protective).

What are the symptoms of respiratory infections?

Symptoms caused by the many respiratory viruses are similar, which may include runny nose, cough, and sore throat.

[COVID and influenza viruses](#) infect the respiratory tract (nose, throat, lungs) and can also severely affect other parts of the body, causing fatigue, headache, muscle/body aches, nausea/vomiting, diarrhea, and/or fever. For COVID-19 and flu infections, tests and antiviral drugs are available and especially useful for people who are at increased risk of complications (e.g., older adults, people with certain underlying medical conditions, people who are pregnant). People who are concerned with worsening symptoms and those with underlying medical conditions should consult with their health care provider.

[RSV](#) (Respiratory Syncytial Virus) is a common respiratory virus that usually causes mild, cold-like symptoms. Although most people recover in a week or two, RSV can be serious, especially for infants and older adults. RSV is the most common cause of bronchiolitis (inflammation of the small airways in the lung) and pneumonia (infection of the lungs) in children younger than 1 year of age in the United States. Some may need to be hospitalized if they are having trouble breathing or are dehydrated. There is no vaccine or antiviral treatment for RSV.

What should I do if my school-age child has symptoms of a respiratory infection?

- a. [Keep your child home until symptoms are mild and improving](#) (and at least 5-10 days for COVID). This includes waiting until 24 hours have passed since resolution of fever without the use of fever-reducing medications. On average, people are contagious with COVID for about 8 days after their symptoms begin. People with flu are most contagious in the first 3-4 days of illness. People with RSV are usually contagious for 3-8 days.
- b. [Test for COVID](#). If your child has symptoms, test immediately. There are two main types of viral tests: antigen tests and PCR tests. Antigen tests are more commonly used and do not require a professional to administer.

- Antigen tests are rapid tests which produce results in 15-30 minutes. These self-tests for COVID are [conveniently available](#), including over-the-counter in retail stores and pharmacies. Tests cost \$7 - \$12, and are [reimbursable through your health insurance](#). Most schools have antigen tests available for students at no cost. [CDPH](#) encourages schools to use antigen test as the primary option because the “rapid results are much better to guide immediate isolation for someone who has virus levels that high enough to transmit virus.”
- PCR tests are performed in laboratories. Information about PCR tests is available through healthcare providers and <https://covid19.ca.gov/get-tested/>.

If your child has worrisome symptoms or is at high-risk for severe disease, contact a health care provider who can test for COVID, influenza, RSV and other illnesses.

- c. [Wear a mask to protect classmates](#). While COVID guidelines recommend that infected persons wear a well-fitting mask around others for a total of 10 days, masking also prevents infections by other respiratory viruses. Students who have returned to school with some mild and improving symptoms, such as runny nose and cough, should wear a mask to protect their classmates from respiratory viruses.