



Interim Guidance: Ending Isolation or Returning to Work for Those Who Have Confirmed or Suspected COVID-19

UPDATED May 13, 2021

The following guidance was developed by the San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFPDH) based on recommendations from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and is posted at www.sfcdcp.org. This interim guidance may change as knowledge, community transmission, and availability of PPE and testing change.

AUDIENCE: People who have had Confirmed COVID-19 or Suspected COVID-19 and want to know when they can stop isolation at home to return to work, school, etc. This includes healthcare workers and first responders. **Health Care Personnel (HCPs) should also consult the [CDC criteria](#) for more detailed guidance.**

Check to see if your employer may have additional policies and procedures for returning to work if you have had Confirmed or Suspected COVID-19.

Clinicians taking care of hospitalized patients should see the [CDC guidance on discontinuing transmission-based precautions in healthcare settings](#).

If you are [fully vaccinated](#) and are asymptomatic, [you do not need to quarantine or get tested](#) after exposure to COVID-19.

Primary changes to this document from the March 10, 2021 version:

- Removes the requirement for fully vaccinated, asymptomatic people to quarantine or get tested.
- Adds information about the importance of getting the COVID-19 vaccination.

BACKGROUND:

For the purposes of this document the following definitions apply:

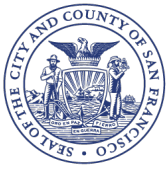
Confirmed COVID-19, means that you tested positive for the COVID-19 virus (regardless of whether you had symptoms) –OR– a clinician said you have or likely have COVID-19 and that you should isolate for at least 10 days.

Suspected COVID-19 for individuals 18 or older means that you have any ONE of the following signs or symptoms, which is new and not explained by another reason:

- Fever of at least 100.4° Fahrenheit
- Chills or repeated shaking/shivering
- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Difficulty breathing
- Sore throat
- Muscle aches
- Headache
- Feeling unusually weak or fatigued
- Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- Runny or congested nose
- Loss of sense of taste or smell

If you meet the criteria for Suspected COVID-19, you should be tested for the virus because if you test negative you may be able to end isolation and return to work/school sooner. **If you choose not to be tested you MUST stay out of work for at least 10 calendar days per the instructions below.**

For instructions on how to isolate or quarantine at home, go to www.sfcdcp.org/i&q



If you have other concerns related to the impact of isolation and quarantine on your work or income, visit www.sfgdcp.org/workerFAQ

COVID-19 vaccine is here

The vaccine is one of the most important ways to end the pandemic. The FDA, CDC, and California's own Scientific Safety Review Workgroup have reviewed data from clinical trials to ensure the safety and effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines. **We strongly encourage all persons to get vaccinated.** The first vaccines approved in the US are about 95% effective in preventing sickness from COVID-19, however we do not know how well they prevent infections that do not cause symptoms. This means that we do not know how common it is for a person who got the vaccine to carry the virus and transmit to others, including [those who have increased risk for severe illness or death](#). Therefore, it is still very important for those who are vaccinated, and for the rest of the population who waits for their vaccines, to continue using all the tools available to help stop this pandemic: wear a mask that covers your mouth and nose when outside your home, avoid get-togethers/gatherings, avoid being indoors with people you don't live with, stay at least 6 feet away from others, and wash your hands after touching shared objects or after touching your face. Find out more about the vaccine, including where and when to get it at: sf.gov/covidvax.

If you have received the COVID-19 vaccine, please read more about whether you need to quarantine at: sfgdcp.org/quarantineaftervaccination. Information on safer social interactions for vaccinated individuals is at: sfgdcp.org/lifeaftervaccine.

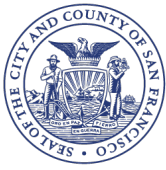
Flu vaccines are critical in the fight against COVID-19 by (1) keeping workers and communities healthy and (2) reducing strain on our healthcare and testing systems that are responding to COVID-19. **Strongly encourage all personnel to get a flu shot.**

1. When can I leave isolation and return to work after Confirmed or Suspected COVID-19?

These are the Criteria for returning to work after Confirmed or Suspected COVID-19:

- If you have Confirmed COVID-19 **OR**
- If you have Suspected COVID-19 and you did not get tested for COVID-19,
you can leave isolation and go back to work only when all of the following are true:
 - You have not had a fever for at least 24 hours, AND
 - During those 24 hours you have not taken any fever-reducing medication such as Tylenol, Acetaminophen, Advil, Ibuprofen, Aleve, or Naproxen; AND
 - Your symptoms have improved¹; AND
 - It has been at least 10 days (the minimum possible period of isolation) since your symptoms first started.
- If you have Confirmed COVID-19 but never had symptoms, you can return to work:

¹ If one of your symptoms was loss of taste or smell, you do not need to wait for that to improve. People who have lost their taste or smell as a result of COVID-19 may not have improvement in these symptoms for several weeks. As long as other symptoms have improved, including 24 hours without fever (without the use of fever-reducing medication), and at least 10 days have passed, you can stop isolation. If loss of taste or smell was your only symptom, then you can return to work 10 days after you first noticed the loss.



- 10 days after the date of your positive diagnostic test.

As with all medical issues, always follow the instructions of your provider who may give you different instructions based on your specific medical history.

What if I had one of the symptoms listed on Page 1 for Suspected COVID-19 but my symptoms are better and I tested negative for the COVID-19 virus? Can I go back to work sooner than 10 days after my symptoms started?

If you never had a positive test for the COVID-19 virus (i.e. you do NOT have Confirmed COVID-19) but you had at least one of the symptoms listed on Page 1, you may be able to go back to work sooner if:

- You get a single negative virus test, AND
- You have not had a fever for 24 hours (without the use of a fever-reducing medication), AND
- Your symptoms have improved.

Check with your healthcare provider or occupational safety office to help make this decision. Because the COVID-19 diagnostic test is not 100% reliable, there is still a chance you may actually have COVID-19 despite a negative test result – this is called a “false negative.” If you are in close contact with persons who are at higher risk of severe disease from COVID-19 (see www.sfcddcp.org/vulnerable), you may consider remaining isolated for at least 10 days since you first had symptoms.

2. If I had confirmed COVID-19 do I need to be tested for the virus again to go back to work?

No. Employers should NOT request proof of negative virus tests. Individuals who have Confirmed COVID-19 should NOT get another COVID-19 virus test to end their isolation early unless an infection control expert advises you to do so. Because of the amount of time it takes to get test results, you are not likely to be able to shorten your isolation period by trying to obtain two consecutive negative virus test results at least 24 hours apart, which is the CDC requirement for allowing Confirmed COVID-19 cases to return to work sooner than 10 days. You are considered no longer contagious if you meet the criteria on Page 2.

I had a positive COVID-19 virus test and more than 10 days have passed since my symptoms started. I am feeling better and have no fever, but I went for a repeat COVID-19 virus test and it is still positive. Can I go back to work?

People may test positive for the COVID-19 virus for a long time after they have COVID-19 because dead viral particles can still be found in bodily fluids for several weeks. These dead viral particles will turn viral tests positive even though they cannot cause disease in others. This is why, even if you were a Confirmed Case and have a subsequent viral test that returns a positive result, it is still okay to go back to work after at least 10 days has passed. **You are no longer considered contagious if you meet the criteria described on Page 2.**

What about a test for antibodies? Do I need a blood test before I go back to work?

No. Serology testing for antibodies is not necessary for anyone to be able to go back to work.

3. If I had one of the symptoms listed on Page 1, do I need to be tested for the virus to go back to work?

If you have at least one of the symptoms listed on Page 1 and have not been tested for COVID-19, **you must stay out of work for at least 10 days** UNLESS you get a COVID-19 virus test and your test result is negative. If



you do get a COVID-19 virus test and your test is negative, you may be able to return to work **after you feel better and have no fever for 24 hours** (without the use of fever-reducing medication). See question 1 above.

If you do not get tested, you may have COVID-19 and not know it. In the absence of a negative COVID-19 test result, you must isolate for as long as people with Confirmed COVID-19 isolate (at least 10 days). See question 1 above.

4. Do I need a note from DPH or my medical provider before returning to work?

No. **Generally speaking, SFPDH discourages non-healthcare businesses and employers from requiring a note to return to work.** If you meet the criteria described on Page 2 above, then you do not need any verification from DPH or your medical provider before returning to work. Healthcare facilities may choose to require documentation in collaboration with their occupational safety program.

If your employer is requesting a note and/or negative virus test to return to work, SFPDH has a general letter available that employees/personnel can provide to their employers: www.sfcdcp.org/workletter

5. What else do I need to know to return to work?

Continue to wear your face covering and wash your hands frequently. Stay 6 feet apart from others outside your household and avoid being indoors with people outside your household to the extent possible.

Monitor your health, and if your symptoms come back or get worse, get checked by your healthcare provider right or your occupational safety office right away.

Your employer or health care provider may suggest more stringent requirements to leave isolation and return to work if you are immunocompromised, or if you are a Healthcare Worker or First Responder.

6. Are there special recommendations if I am a Healthcare Worker or First Responder?

Check to see if your employer has additional policies and procedures for returning to work if you have had Confirmed or Suspected COVID-19.

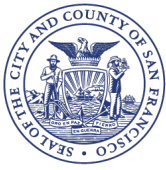
Avoid contact with, and providing care to, patients who have a weakened immune system such as cancer or transplant patients, until at least 14 days after your illness started.

These guidelines should **not** be used by people who work in Skilled Nursing Facilities, which have different requirements. See www.sfcdcp.org/covid19hcp under "Long Term Care and Senior Care."

7. I had close contact with someone who has Confirmed COVID-19. When can I return to work?

If you are [fully vaccinated](#) against COVID-19 and are asymptomatic and have had close contact with somebody with Confirmed COVID-19, you do not have to quarantine or miss work. You should self-monitor for symptoms for 14 days after exposure. If you experience symptoms you should isolate, get tested and inform your healthcare provider. If you have had close contact with a person with Confirmed COVID-19 and live or work in a high-density workplace (like congregate housing, or a dormitory) you should get tested. Please read more about whether you need to quarantine at www.sfcdcp.org/quarantineaftervaccination.

If you have not completed the vaccination protocols or have COVID-19 you should follow the quarantine



rules after a close contact with someone who has suspected or confirmed COVID-19. Quarantine guidance is found at www.sfdcp.org/i&q.

After having close contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19, you must self-quarantine at home and stay away from others while you wait to see if you develop symptoms of COVID-19. Do not go to school or work. Learn more about how to keep yourself and others safe at www.sfdph.org/dph/alerts/covid-guidance/Guidance-Isolation-and-Quarantine.pdf.

A **Close Contact** is someone who had any of the following types of contact with a person with COVID-19 (regardless of whether either party was masked) while they were in their **contagious period***:

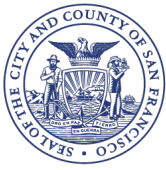
- 1) was within 6 feet of the person with COVID-19 for a total of 15 minutes or more during a 24 hour period,
- 2) lived or stayed overnight with a person with COVID-19,
- 3) was the intimate sex partner of a person with COVID-19, including only kissing,
- 4) took care of or got taken care of by someone with COVID-19, **OR**
- 5) had direct contact with the body fluids or secretions with a person with COVID-19 (e.g. got coughed or sneezed on or shared eating or drinking utensils)

***Contagious Period: People with COVID-19 are considered contagious starting 48 hours before their symptoms began until 1) at least 10 days have passed since their symptoms began, 2) they haven't had a fever for at least 24 hours AND 3) their symptoms have improved. If the person with COVID-19 never had symptoms, they are considered contagious starting 48 hours before their positive COVID-19 test was collected until 10 days after they were tested.**

SFDPH has updated its guidance on quarantine duration for close contacts of COVID-19 cases to align with recent changes by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the California Department of Public Health (CDPH). The CDC and CDPH still recommend a quarantine period of 14 days after COVID-19 exposure as the most health protective duration to limit the spread of COVID-19. SFDPH, like CDC and CDPH, recognizes the long duration of quarantine creates economic and personal hardship, impacts people's compliance with quarantine, and may impact the willingness of cases to name close contacts.

The following quarantine duration is an acceptable alternative to the 14 days recommended above:

- **Most people who have had close contact with someone with COVID-19 may end their quarantine after day 10 if they do not develop symptoms during this time. SFDPH strongly recommends that close contacts without symptoms get tested on or after day 6 of quarantine.** Because there is a small chance that close contacts may still be infected, they should continue to wear a face mask and stay at least 6 feet away from others until day 14.
 - Day 0 of quarantine is the day of the last close contact with the person with COVID-19.
 - Tests should be a COVID-19 nucleic acid amplification test (e.g. PCR or LAMP).
 - Close contacts should self-monitor for COVID-19 symptoms through day 14. If they have symptoms at any point during their quarantine, they should **get tested immediately**, even if they tested negative earlier during their quarantine.
 - People who develop symptoms or test positive will need to follow self-isolation guidelines at sfdcp.org/I&Q.
- Given the higher risk and impact of transmission in high risk congregate living settings, **people who live in long term care facilities (including SNFs and RCFEs), correctional facilities, shelters, or**



dormitories must quarantine for 14 days after their last close contact with a person with COVID-19.

- **People who work in long term care facilities (including SNFs and RCFEs), correctional facilities, shelters, or dormitories, or those who work with people who are severely immunocompromised** (e.g. bone marrow or solid organ transplants, receiving chemotherapy) **may end home-quarantine 10 days after their last close contact with someone with COVID-19**, if they do not develop symptoms, **but they cannot return to work for 14 days**, unless they are an officially designated “Essential COVID-19 Response Workers” during times of staffing shortage. Consult with your employer and learn more information at sfdph.org/dph/files/ig/guidance-quarantine-duration.pdf.

8. I had a new exposure to someone with suspected or confirmed COVID-19, after I recovered from COVID-19 within the last 3 months, or after I am fully vaccinated.

If you are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and are asymptomatic you do not have to quarantine or miss work.

Individuals who have **recovered from COVID-19 within the last 3 months**, or **who have been fully vaccinated** have close contact with a someone who a confirmed or suspected diagnosis of COVID-19 and are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms should follow [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov) guidance to decide whether or not to quarantine and/or get a COVID-19 test again. Learn more from CDC's [Interim Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People](https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2021/s0810-covid-19-quarantine.html) and at [sfdcp.org/quarantineaftervaccination](https://www.sfdcp.org/quarantineaftervaccination).

If you develop symptoms, you must isolate even if you are fully vaccinated or recovered from COVID-19 within the last 3 months. See background and question #1, both on page 1, above.

Resources

- San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) COVID-19 guidance: [sfdcp.org/covid19](https://www.sfdcp.org/covid19)
- Flu Shot information from San Francisco: [sf.gov/flu-shots](https://www.sf.gov/flu-shots)
- California Department of Industrial Relations: [COVID-19 Emergency Temporary Standards Frequently Asked Questions](https://www.dir.ca.gov/COVID-19-Emergency-Temporary-Standards-Frequently-Asked-Questions)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) return to work guidance:
 - General: [CDC General Guidance for Return to Work](https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2021/s0810-covid-19-quarantine.html)
 - Healthcare: [CDC Healthcare Worker Guidance for Return to Work](https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2021/s0810-covid-19-quarantine.html)
 - People previously infected: [Retesting and Quarantine of Adults Recovered from Laboratory-diagnosed SARS-CoV-2 Infection with Subsequent Re-exposure](https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2021/s0810-covid-19-quarantine.html)