



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

UPDATED DECEMBER 1, 2020

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 <https://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](#).

### Primary changes to this document from the August 8, 2020 version:

- Adds nausea and vomiting as symptoms of COVID-19
- Adds criteria to address whether [people who recovered from COVID-19 and are re-exposed to COVID-19 need to undergo repeat quarantine](#) and re-testing
- Updates the definition of “close contact” to align with the CDC
- Includes Flu Vaccination statement

## BACKGROUND:

For the purposes of this document the following definitions apply:

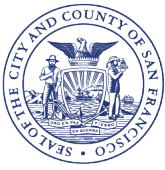
**Confirmed COVID-19**, means that you tested positive for the COVID-19 virus (regardless of whether you had symptoms) –OR– a clinician said you have or likely have COVID-19 and that you should isolate for at least 10 days.

**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](http://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.sfcddp.org/workerFAQ](http://www.sfcddp.org/workerFAQ)

## 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 improved<sup>1</sup>; 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:
  - 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?**

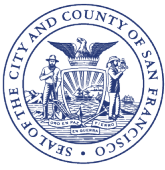
If you never had a positive test for the COVID-19 virus (i.e. you do NOT have Confirmed COVID-19) but you had at least one of the symptoms listed on Page 1, you may be able to go back to work sooner **if:**

- 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.sfcddp.org/vulnerable](http://www.sfcddp.org/vulnerable)), you may consider

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<sup>1</sup> 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.



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.

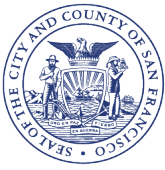
**If you do not get tested, you may have COVID-19 and not know it. In the absence of a negative COVID-19 test result, you must isolate for as long as people with Confirmed COVID-19 isolate (at least 10 days).**

However, if you 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.

## 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:

<https://www.sfc-dcp.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.

### [Skip the Flu! Get the Flu shot.](#)

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. **Those over the age of 6 months are strongly encouraged to get a flu shot.** Click [this link](#) to find out where to get a flu shot in San Francisco.

## 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.

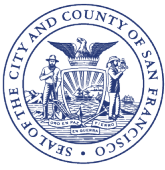
These guidelines should not be used by people who work in Skilled Nursing Facilities, which have different requirements. See [www.sfc-dcp.org/covid19hcp](http://www.sfc-dcp.org/covid19hcp) under “Long Term Care and Senior Care.”

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

After having close contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19, you must self-quarantine at home for 14 days to watch and wait to see if you develop symptoms of COVID-19. Do not go to school or work.

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 contagious:

- 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.

If you have had Close Contact and:

- You do not develop any symptoms, are asymptomatic: you should be tested at 2 time points: upon learning of the exposure; and again at day 10-14 of the 14-day quarantine period, with at least 7 days between tests.
- You get a positive COVID-19 test: you have Confirmed COVID-19 and you can end isolation using the criteria on Page 2 above;
- If you get a negative COVID-19 test, you must still remain in Quarantine for 14 days after your last close contact with the confirmed COVID-19 case.

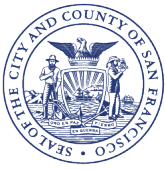
HOWEVER, if you are an "Essential COVID-19 Response Worker," you may be able to return to work immediately after Close Contact with a person who tested positive for COVID-19, as long as you are not sick and comply with requirements to wear a mask and any other policies specific to your employer. See [San Francisco Directive of the Health Officer No. 2020-02c](#) for who is defined as an Essential COVID-19 Response Worker.

## 8. I had a new exposure to someone with suspected or confirmed COVID-19, after I recovered from COVID-19.

Individuals who have recovered from COVID-19 and have a Close Contact with a case can follow [CDC](#) guidance to decide whether to quarantine and/or get a COVID-19 test again.

If you recovered from laboratory confirmed COVID-19 in the past three months and have a new exposure to someone with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 then you do not need to quarantine or get another test for COVID-19 if you can answer "Yes" to all of the following questions::

1. Do you meet the following three criteria to end isolation?
  - Your symptoms are better, AND
  - You have not had a fever for 24 hours (without the use of a fever-reducing medication), AND
  - It has been at least 10 days (the minimum possible period of isolation) since your symptoms first started.
2. Has it been less than 3 months since your first symptoms of COVID-19 or if you were asymptomatic, has it been less than 3 months since your first positive viral test?
3. Have you remained asymptomatic since the new exposure?



If you answer yes to questions 1 and 2 but “no” to question 3 (that is **you have or develop new symptoms consistent with COVID-19 within 14 days of the new exposure**):

- Consult your health care provider or occupational safety office.
- If an alternative cause of the symptoms cannot be identified, you may be asked to retest for COVID-19 infection.
- In the absence of a clinical evaluation to rule out COVID-19 reinfection, you must meet the following criteria before returning to work:
  - You have had at least 24 hours with no fever at all; 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 improved<sup>2</sup>; AND
  - It has been at least 10 days (the minimum possible period of isolation) since your symptoms first started.

## Resources

Stay informed. Information is changing rapidly. Useful resources can be found at:

- San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH)
  - <https://www.sfdcp.org/covid19>
- SFGOV
  - Flu Shots  
<https://sf.gov/flu-shots>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) return to work guidance:
  - General: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/disposition-in-home-patients.html>
  - Healthcare: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/healthcare-facilities/hcp-return-work.html>
  - Updates regarding Exposure after Suspected or Confirmed COVID-19 infection: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/duration-isolation.html#Annex>

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<sup>2</sup> 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.