

Key Messages and Actions for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools

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I. FACTS ABOUT COVID-19

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus. 'CO' stands for corona, 'VI' for virus, and 'D' for disease. Formerly, this disease was referred to as '2019 novel coronavirus' or '2019-nCoV.' The COVID-19 virus is a new virus linked to the same family of viruses as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and some types of common cold.

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

Symptoms can include fever, cough and shortness of breath. In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia or breathing difficulties. More rarely, the disease can be fatal. These symptoms are similar to the flu (influenza) or the common cold, which are a lot more common than COVID-19. This is why testing is required to confirm if someone has COVID-19.

How does COVID-19 spread?

The virus is transmitted through direct contact with respiratory droplets of an infected person (generated through coughing and sneezing). Individuals can also be infected from and touching surfaces contaminated with the virus and touching their face (e.g., eyes, nose, mouth). The COVID-19 virus may survive on surfaces for several hours, but simple disinfectants can kill it.

Who is most at risk?

We are learning more about how COVID-19 affects people every day. Older people, and people with chronic medical conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease, appear to be more at risk of developing severe symptoms. As this is a new virus, we are still learning about how it affects children. We know it is possible for people of any age to be infected with the virus, but so far there are relatively few cases of COVID-19 reported among children. This is a new virus and we need to learn more about how it affects children. The virus can be fatal in rare cases, so far mainly among older people with pre-existing medical conditions.

What is the treatment for COVID-19?

There is no currently available vaccine for COVID-19. However, many of the symptoms can be treated and getting early care from a healthcare provider can make the disease less dangerous. There are several clinical trials that are being conducted to evaluate potential therapeutics for COVID-19.

How can the spread of COVID-19 be slowed down or prevented?

As with other respiratory infections like the flu or the common cold, public health measures are critical to slow the spread of illnesses. Public health measures are everyday preventive actions that include:

- ✓ staying home when sick;
- ✓ covering mouth and nose with flexed elbow or tissue when coughing or sneezing. Dispose of used tissue immediately;
- ✓ washing hands often with soap and water; and
- ✓ cleaning frequently touched surfaces and objects.

As we learn more about COVID-19 public health officials may recommend additional actions.

II. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has been declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) and the virus has now spread to many countries and territories. While a lot is still unknown about the virus that causes COVID-19, we do know that it is transmitted through direct contact with respiratory droplets of an infected person (generated through coughing and sneezing) Individuals can also be infected from touching surfaces contaminated with the virus and touching their face (e.g., eyes, nose, mouth). While COVID-19 continues to spread it is important that communities take action to prevent further transmission, reduce the impacts of the outbreak and support control measures.

The protection of children and educational facilities is particularly important. Precautions are necessary to prevent the potential spread of COVID-19 in school settings; however, care must also be taken to avoid stigmatizing students and staff who may have been exposed to the virus. It is important to remember that COVID-19 does not differentiate between borders, ethnicities, disability status, age or gender. Education settings should continue to be welcoming, respectful, inclusive, and supportive environments to all. Measures taken by schools can prevent the entry and spread of COVID-19 by students and staff who may have been exposed to the virus, while minimizing disruption and protecting students and staff from discrimination.

Purpose

Today, children and young people are global citizens, powerful agents of change and the next generation of caregivers, scientists, and doctors. Any crisis presents the opportunity to help them learn, cultivate compassion and increase resilience while building a safer and more caring community. Having information and facts about COVID-19 will help diminish students' fears and anxieties around the disease and support their ability to cope with any secondary impacts in their lives. This guidance provides key messages and considerations for engaging school administrators, teachers and staff, parents, caregivers and community members, as well as children themselves in promoting safe and healthy schools.

The purpose of this document is to provide clear and actionable guidance for safe operations through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in schools and other educational facilities. The guidance, while specific to countries that have already confirmed the transmission of COVID-19, is still relevant in all other contexts. Education can encourage students to become advocates for disease prevention and control at home, in school, and in their community by talking to others about how to prevent the spread of viruses. Maintaining safe school operations or reopening schools after a closure requires many considerations but, if done well, can promote public health.

III. SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS AND STAFF

Key Messages & Actions

Basic principles

Following basic principles can help keep students, teachers, and staff safe at school and help stop the spread of this disease. Recommendations for healthy schools are:

- Sick students, teachers and other staff should not come to school
- Schools should enforce regular hand washing with safe water and soap, alcohol rub/hand sanitizer or chlorine solution and, at a minimum, daily disinfection and cleaning of school surfaces
- Schools should provide water, sanitation and waste management facilities and follow environmental cleaning and decontamination procedures
- Schools should promote social distancing (a term applied to certain actions that are taken to slow down the spread of a highly contagious disease, including limiting large groups of people coming together)

Know the latest facts

Understand basic information about coronavirus disease (COVID-19), including its symptoms, complications, how it is transmitted and how to prevent transmission. Stay informed about COVID-19 through reputable sources such as UNICEF, WHO and national health ministry advisories. Be aware of fake information/myths that may circulate by word-of-mouth or online.

Ensure safe school operations

See 'Checklist on Safe School Environments' below

Update or develop school emergency and contingency plans. Work with officials to guarantee schools are not used as shelters, treatment units, etc. Consider cancelling any community events/meetings that usually take place on school premises, based on risk.

Reinforce frequent handwashing and sanitation and procure needed supplies. Prepare and maintain handwashing stations with soap and water, and if possible, place alcohol-based hand rub (hand sanitizers) in each classroom, at entrances and exits, and near lunchrooms and toilets.

Clean and disinfect school buildings, classrooms and especially water and sanitation facilities at least once a day, particularly surfaces that are touched by many people (railings, lunch tables, sports equipment, door and window handles, toys, teaching and learning aids etc.)

Implement social distancing practices that may include:

- Staggering the beginning and end of the school day
- Cancelling assemblies, sports games and other events that create crowded conditions
- When possible, create space for children's desks to be at least one metre apart
- Teach and model creating space and avoiding unnecessary touching

Establish procedures if students or staff become unwell

Plan ahead with local health authorities, school health staff and update emergency contact lists. Ensure a procedure for separating sick students and staff from those who are well – without creating stigma – and a process for informing parents/caregivers, and consulting with health care providers/health authorities wherever possible. Students/staff may need to be referred directly to a health facility, depending on the situation/context, or sent home. Share procedures with staff, parents and students ahead of time.

Promote information sharing

Coordinate and follow guidelines from the national health and education authorities. Share known information with staff, caregivers and students, providing updated information on the disease situation, including prevention and control efforts at school. Reinforce that caregivers should alert the school and health care authorities if someone in their home has been diagnosed with COVID-19 and keep their child at home. Utilize parent-teacher committees and other mechanisms to promote information sharing. Also be sure to address children’s questions and concerns, including through the development of child-friendly materials such as posters which can be placed on notice boards, in restrooms, and other central locations.

Adapt school policies where appropriate

Develop flexible attendance and sick leave policies that encourage students and staff to stay home when sick or when caring for sick family members. Discourage the use of perfect attendance awards and incentives. Identify critical job functions and positions, and plan for alternative coverage by cross-training staff. Plan for possible academic calendar changes, particularly in relation to breaks and exams.

Monitor school attendance

Implement school absenteeism monitoring systems to track student and staff absence and compare against usual absenteeism patterns at the school. Alert local health authorities about large increases in student and staff absenteeism due to respiratory illnesses.

Plan for continuity of learning

In the case of absenteeism/sick leave or temporary school closures, support continued access to quality education. This can include:

- Use of online/e-learning strategies
- Assigning reading and exercises for home study
- Radio, podcast or television broadcasts of academic content
- Assigning teachers to conduct remote daily or weekly follow up with students
- Review/develop accelerated education strategies

Implement targeted health education

Integrate disease prevention and control in daily activities and lessons. Ensure content is age-, gender-, ethnicity-, and disability-responsive and activities are built into existing subjects. (See Section on Age-Appropriate Health Education)

Address Mental Health/Psychosocial support needs

Encourage children to discuss their questions and concerns. Explain it is normal that they may experience different reactions and encourage them to talk to teachers if they have any questions or concerns. Provide information in an honest, age-appropriate manner. Guide students on how to support their peers and prevent exclusion and bullying. Ensure teachers are aware of local resources for their own well-being. Work with school health workers/social workers to identify and support students and staff who exhibit signs of distress.

Support vulnerable populations

Work with social service systems to ensure continuity of critical services that may take place in schools such as health screenings, feeding programs or therapies for children with special needs. Consider the specific needs of children with disabilities, and how marginalized populations may be more acutely impacted by the illness or its secondary effects. Examine any specific implications for girls that may increase their risk, such as responsibility for taking care of the sick at home, or exploitation when out of school.

CHECKLIST FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS AND STAFF

- 1.** Promote and demonstrate regular hand washing and positive hygiene behaviors and monitor their uptake. Ensure adequate, clean and separate toilets for girls and boys
 - Ensure soap and safe water is available at age-appropriate hand washing stations
 - Encourage frequent and thorough washing (at least 20 seconds)
 - Place hand sanitizers in toilets, classrooms, halls, and near exits where possible
 - Ensure adequate, clean and separate toilets or latrines for girls and boys
- 2.** Clean and disinfect school buildings, classrooms and especially water and sanitation facilities at least once a day, particularly surfaces that are touched by many people (railings, lunch tables, sports equipment, door and window handles, toys, teaching and learning aids etc.)
 - Use sodium hypochlorite at 0.5% (equivalent 5000ppm) for disinfecting surfaces and 70% ethyl alcohol for disinfection of small items, and ensure appropriate equipment for cleaning staff
- 3.** Increase air flow and ventilation where climate allows (open windows, use air conditioning where available, etc.)
- 4.** Post signs encouraging good hand and respiratory hygiene practices
- 5.** Ensure trash is removed daily and disposed of safely

IV. PARENTS/CAREGIVERS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Key Messages and Actions

COVID-19 is a new virus and we are still learning about how it affects children. We know it is possible for people of any age to be infected with the virus, but so far there have been relatively few cases of COVID-19 reported among children. The virus can be fatal in cases, so far mainly among older people with pre-existing medical conditions.

Know the latest facts

Understand basic information about coronavirus disease (COVID-19), including its symptoms, complications, how it is transmitted and how to prevent transmission. Stay informed about COVID-19 through reputable sources such as UNICEF and WHO and national health ministry advisories. Be aware of fake information/myths that may circulate by word-of-mouth or online.

Recognize the symptoms of COVID-19 (coughing, fever, shortness of breath) in your child

Seek medical advice by first calling your health facility/provider and then take your child in, if advised. Remember that symptoms of COVID-19 such as cough or fever can be similar to those of the flu, or the common cold, which are a lot more common. If your child is sick, keep them home from school and notify the school of your child's absence and symptoms. Request reading and assignments so that students can continue learning while at home. Explain to your child what is happening in simple words and reassure them that they are safe.

Keep children in school when healthy

If your child isn't displaying any symptoms such as a fever or cough it's best to keep them in school – unless a public health advisory or other relevant warning or official advice has been issued affecting your child's school.

Instead of keeping children out of school, teach them good hand and respiratory hygiene practices for school and elsewhere, like frequent handwashing (see below), covering a cough or sneeze with a flexed elbow or tissue, then throwing away the tissue into a closed bin, and not touching their eyes, mouths or noses if they haven't properly washed their hands.

Washing hands properly

Step 1: Wet hands with safe running water

Step 2: Apply enough soap to cover wet hands

Step 3: Scrub all surfaces of the hands – including backs of hands, between fingers and under nails – for at least 20 seconds

Step 4: Rinse thoroughly with running water

Step 5: Dry hands with a clean, dry cloth, single-use towel or hand drier as available

Wash your hands often, especially before and after eating; after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing; going to the bathroom/ toilets/latrines and whenever your hands are visibly dirty. If soap

and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. Always wash hands with soap and water, if hands are visibly dirty.

Help children cope with the stress

Children may respond to stress in different ways. Common responses include having difficulties sleeping, bedwetting, having pain in the stomach or head, and being anxious, withdrawn, angry, clingy or afraid to be left alone. Respond to children's reactions in a supportive way and explain to them that they are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Listen to their concerns and take time to comfort them and give them affection, reassure them they're safe and praise them frequently.

If possible, create opportunities for children to play and relax. Keep regular routines and schedules as much as possible, especially before they go to sleep, or help create new ones in a new environment. Provide age-appropriate facts about what has happened, explain what is going on and give them clear examples on what they can do to help protect themselves and others from infection. Share information about what could happen in a reassuring way.

For example, if your child is feeling sick and staying at home or the hospital, you could say, "You have to stay at home/at the hospital because it is safer for you and your friends. I know it is hard (maybe scary or even boring) at times, but we need to follow the rules to keep ourselves and others safe. Things will go back to normal soon."

CHECKLIST FOR PARENTS/CAREGIVERS & COMMUNITY MEMBERS

- 1. Monitor your child's health and keep them home from school if they are ill
- 2. Teach and model good hygiene practices for your children
 - Wash your hands with soap and safe water frequently. If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. Always wash hands with soap and water, if hands are visibly dirty
 - Ensure that safe drinking water is available and toilets or latrines are clean and available at home
 - Ensure waste is safely collected, stored and disposed of
 - Cough and sneeze into a tissue or your elbow and avoid touching your face, eyes, mouth, nose
- 3. Encourage your children to ask questions and express their feelings with you and their teachers. Remember that your child may have different reactions to stress; be patient and understanding.
- 4. Prevent stigma by using facts and reminding students to be considerate of one another
- 5. Coordinate with the school to receive information and ask how you can support school safety efforts (though parent-teacher committees, etc.)

V. STUDENTS AND CHILDREN

Children and young people should understand basic, age-appropriate information about coronavirus disease (COVID-19), including its symptoms, complications, how it is transmitted and how to prevent transmission. Stay informed about COVID-19 through reputable sources such as UNICEF, WHO and national health ministry advisories. Be aware of fake information/myths that may circulate by word-of-mouth or online.

CHECKLIST FOR STUDENTS AND CHILDREN

- 1.** In a situation like this it is normal to feel sad, worried, confused, scared or angry. Know that you are not alone and talk to someone you trust, like your parent or teacher so that you can help keep yourself and your school safe and healthy.
 - Ask questions, educate yourself and get information from reliable sources

- 2.** Protect yourself and others
 - Wash your hands frequently, always with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
 - Remember to not touch your face
 - Do not share cups, eating utensils, food or drinks with others

- 3.** Be a leader in keeping yourself, your school, family and community healthy.
 - Share what you learn about preventing disease with your family and friends, especially with younger children
 - Model good practices such as sneezing or coughing into your elbow and washing your hands, especially for younger family members

- 4.** Don't stigmatize your peers or tease anyone about being sick; remember that the virus doesn't follow geographical boundaries, ethnicities, age or ability or gender.

- 5.** Tell your parents, another family member, or a caregiver if you feel sick, and ask to stay home.

Age-specific health education

Below are suggestions on how to engage students of different ages on preventing and controlling the spread of COVID-19 and other viruses. Activities should be contextualized further based on the specific needs of children (language, ability, gender, etc.).

Preschool

- Focus on good health behaviors, such as covering coughs and sneezes with the elbow and washing hands frequently
- Sing a song while washing hands to practice the recommended 20 second duration.
 - Children can “practice” washing their hands with hand sanitizer
- Develop a way to track hand washing and reward for frequent/timely hand washing
- Use puppets or dolls to demonstrate symptoms (sneezing, coughing, fever) and what to do if they feel sick (i.e. their head hurts, their stomach hurts, they feel hot or extra tired) and how to comfort someone who is sick (cultivating empathy and safe caring behaviors)
- Have children sit further apart from one another, have them practice stretching their arms out or ‘flap their wings’, they should keep enough space to not touch their friends.

Primary School

- Make sure to listen to children’s concerns and answer their questions in an age-appropriate manner; don’t overwhelm them with too much information. Encourage them to express and communicate their feelings. Discuss the different reactions they may experience and explain that these are normal reactions to an abnormal situation.
- Emphasize that children can do a lot to keep themselves and others safe.
 - Introduce the concept of social distancing (standing further away from friends, avoiding large crowds, not touching people if you don’t need to, etc.)
 - Focus on good health behaviors, such as covering coughs and sneezes with the elbow and washing hands
- Help children understand the basic concepts of disease prevention and control. Use exercises that demonstrate how germs can spread. For example, by putting colored water in a spray bottle and spraying over a piece of white paper. Observe how far the droplets travel.
- Demonstrate why it is important to wash hands for 20 seconds with soap and water
 - Put a small amount of glitter in students’ hands and have them wash them with just water, notice how much glitter remains, then have them wash for 20 seconds with soap and water
- Have students analyze texts to identify high risk behaviors and suggest modifying behaviors

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- For example, a teacher comes to school with a cold. He sneezes and covers it with his hand. He shakes hands with a colleague. He wipes his hands after with a handkerchief then goes to class to teach. What did the teacher do that was risky? What should he have done instead?

Lower Secondary School

- Make sure to listen to students' concerns and answer their questions.
- Emphasize that students can do a lot to keep themselves and others safe.
 - Introduce the concept of social distancing
 - Focus on good health behaviors, such as covering coughs and sneezes with the elbow and washing hands
 - Remind students that they can model healthy behaviors for their families
- Encourage students to prevent and address stigma
 - Discuss the different reactions they may experience and explain these are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Encourage them to express and communicate their feelings
- Build students' agency and have them promote facts about public health.
 - Have students make their own Public Service Announcements through school announcements and posters
- Incorporate relevant health education into other subjects
 - Science can cover the study of viruses, disease transmission and the importance of vaccinations
 - Social studies can focus on the history of pandemics and evolution of policies on public health and safety
 - Media literacy lessons can empower students to be critical thinkers and makers, effective communicators and active citizens

Upper Secondary School

- Make sure to listen to students' concerns and answer their questions.
- Emphasize that students can do a lot to keep themselves and others safe.
 - Introduce the concept of social distancing
- Focus on good health behaviors, such as covering coughs and sneezes with the elbow and washing hands Encourage students to prevent and address stigma
 - Discuss the different reactions they may experience and explain these are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Encourage them to express and communicate their feelings.
- Incorporate relevant health education into other subjects
 - Science courses can cover the study of viruses, disease transmission and the

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- importance of vaccinations
 - Social studies can focus on the history of pandemics and their secondary effects and investigate how public policies can promote tolerance and social cohesion.
 - Have students make their own Public Service Announcements via social media, radio or even local tv broadcasting
 - Media literacy lessons can empower students to be critical thinkers and makers, effective communicators and active citizens.

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