Missoula City-County Health Department
ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

301 West Alder Street | Missoula MT 59802-4123
www.missoulacounty.us/HealthDept

Phone | 406.258.4755
Fax | 406.258.4781

MCCHD Guidance for Employers

What to Expect if a Staff Member Tests Positive for COVID-19

Purpose of this Document

This document is intended to help businesses understand the COVID-19 infectious disease investigation process, as well as the implications of having an employee test positive for COVID-19, so that businesses can make informed decisions that will reduce the spread of COVID-19 in their establishment specifically, and in the community more generally, while the Missoula City-County Health Department (MCCHD) COVID-19 Infectious Disease Team conducts case investigation and contact tracing efforts associated with a positive case in a business.

What happens when one of your staff tests positive for COVID-19?

As with all things related to COVID-19, the answer is not cut and dry. How much a business is affected by a positive case depends on several factors such as:

- When the sick employee worked,
- With whom they had close contact* while infectious, and
- Where in the business they routinely worked while infectious.
    - *A close contact is anyone who has been within 6 feet or less of an infectious person for 15 minutes or more; minutes can be cumulative.

Many employees will inform their boss as soon as they know that they are positive for COVID-19, even before MCCHD contacts the individual directly to initiate case investigation and contact tracing efforts. MCCHD encourages this practice and also recognizes that it might put a business in a difficult place as management is left wondering what steps to take next and who is allowed to continue working. **The following considerations are intended to provide guidance when businesses are navigating those next steps.**

Considerations

1. Prevention is the Best Medicine.

Limiting possible exposure routes in your business can make a difference in how many people are potentially affected if an employee tests positive for COVID-19. Prevention includes the following safety measures:

- Pre-shift health checks,
- Staff with symptoms (even mild symptoms!) stay home,
- Require employees stay 6 feet away from all other people, including other employees,
- Reduce the number of times staff must come within 6 feet of other people,
- Use creative scheduling such as:
  Having the same staff always work together,**
  - Not intermingling same-shift staff with other shifts, and **
  - When possible, allowing staff to work remotely.**
    **These strategies help keep an individual's social circle small, which impacts the number of close contacts any individual may have if/when they test positive for COVID. The smaller the social circle, the fewer the potential number of close contacts there will be if/when there is an active case.
- Require face coverings for everyone in the business, including areas that are not open to the public and are for staff only, and
- Increase cleaning and sanitizing of all common-touch areas of the business.

In Missoula, we have seen many cases arising from workplace clusters, so it is very important to pay attention to how employees are interacting with one another and the public while at work.

2. What to do if a staff member has COVID-related symptoms.

- First and foremost, do not allow that employee to work.
- Second, the employee needs to evaluate testing options. The Health Department encourages anyone with a COVID-related symptom – even a mild one – to call a screening center like 406-258-INFO (4636) to see if they should be tested for COVID-19.
- If the employee suspects an underlying chronic disease, such as allergies, migraines, or irritable bowel syndrome, we recommend that they isolate until enough time has passed for the individual to be confident that their symptoms are from that underlying condition and not COVID. Once they are sure that their symptoms are from that underlying condition, then they can end isolation, and return to work when allowed under the employer's sick leave policies.
- If the COVID-related symptoms are identified/diagnosed as being caused by something else, such as a hangover, strep throat, or a concussion, the employee can return to work when

allowed under the employer's sick leave policies. Note that stomach flu, undiagnosed foodborne illness, or the common cold do not qualify under this exception.

- If there is not a clear, alternative reason for the employee's symptoms, and the employee does not get tested for COVID-19, the employee should not return to work until:
  o 10 days have passed since their symptoms first appeared **and**
  o 24 hours have passed with no fever without having used fever-reducing medications **and**
  o Other symptoms of COVID-19 are improving***
  ***Loss of taste and smell may persist for weeks or months after recovery and need not delay the end of isolation.

3. What to expect if a staff member has symptoms and is being tested for COVID-19.

- A person who is tested at the Missoula City-County testing site will be given a Letter to Isolate until the test results come back. **While other testing sites might not give patients similar letters, all symptomatic individuals waiting for the results of a COVID-19 test should isolate until they know the results.**

> Isolation means staying inside, at home, without leaving the property for the entirety of the isolation period. People who are in isolation or quarantine cannot go to work, shop at the grocery store, hike in the woods, or meet up with friends.

- Test results are typically returned within 72 hours, but some tests can take 2 weeks or more. At times, reporting results and subsequent patient notification takes longer than anticipated. This is not an issue specific to Montana, but rather is the trend across the US, in general.
- A person experiencing symptoms—**that is not a close contact to a known active case**—that has been tested, can go back to work if the test is negative.
  o Close contacts must quarantine for the entire 14-day period because a negative result on one day doesn't preclude them from developing symptoms throughout the remaining 14-day period.
- A person experiencing symptoms who was tested and the results have taken longer than two weeks to come back can return to work when they meet the CDC criteria below:
  o 10 days have passed since their symptoms first appeared, and
  o 24 hours have passed with no fever without the use of fever-reducing medications, and
  o Other symptoms of COVID-19 are improving***
    ***Loss of taste and smell may persist for weeks or months after recovery and need not delay the end of isolation.

4. What to expect if a staff member tests positive for COVID-19.

- If the employee's result is positive, MCCHD is automatically notified by the lab, regardless of where the individual sought testing. The Health Department will interview the person who is sick and will give them an official Order to Isolate.
- MCCHD identifies people who were in close contact with the employee which includes the time in which the employee was contagious, including 2 days before symptoms appeared (or 2 days before the test if the person never had symptoms.)
- The Health Department also asks that the employee notify their employer of the situation.
- MCCHD must follow state and federal laws regarding disclosing personal medical information, so they are careful about if or how they talk with employers about a positive case.
- Ideally, the employee will give the Health Department permission to speak freely with the employer. This helps the case investigator further identify possible contacts and make sure that necessary precautions are taken to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in the business environment, as well as in the general community. If the employee does not grant permission, the Health Department may still contact the employer to seek information but will have to speak in more general terms.

5. What to expect if there are close contacts to a positive case associated with your establishment.

It is not uncommon for coworkers to be considered close contacts to other sick employees. All close contacts identified by the Health Department are quarantined for 14 days from their last exposure to the person positive for COVID-19.

> Like isolation, quarantine means staying inside, at home, without leaving the property for the entirety of the quarantine. People who are quarantined cannot go to work, shop at the grocery store, hike in the woods, or meet up with friends.

- A close contact is someone who:
  - Was within 6 feet or less of the positive person for at least 15 minutes when they may have been contagious. That time is cumulative, meaning that multiple shorter duration exposures can also qualify someone as a close contact.
- Wearing cloth face coverings reduces the potential spread of COVID-19 and the number of additional cases that might come from a single positive case. However, if a person meets any of the above criteria, they will be considered a close contact, regardless of whether or when cloth face coverings were worn. The benefit of a cloth face covering is that it reduces the chance that

coworkers and customers will get sick, especially when it is used in conjunction with other safe behaviors and practices.

- Close contacts are quarantined for 14 days after their last exposure to the person with COVID-19. While a close contact may be tested during the quarantine, a negative test **does not** shorten their quarantine.
    - **WHY:** If you are tested as a close contact, and the test is negative, that does not mean that you won't become infected during the 14-day incubation period of COVID-19. This just means you were not positive at the time of the test. Close contacts are tested because if they come back positive, case investigators can connect with and quarantine their close contacts earlier, preventing them from spreading the disease to others.

6. What to expect when staff return to work.

A COVID-19 positive case cannot return to work until officially released by MCCHD. Typically, the employee will receive a letter from the Health Department releasing them from isolation. Employers can request a copy of this letter from their staff member.

- CDC guidance requires that an employee isolates at home until:
    - At least 72 hours have passed since their fever returned to normal without the use of fever-reducing medications AND their respiratory symptoms (cough, shortness of breath, etc.) have improved, AND
    - At least 10 days have passed since symptoms first appeared.

7. What to expect if a staff member has potentially been exposed to someone with COVID-19.

People are understandably nervous when they hear that a friend of a friend or a coworker has tested positive for COVID-19. Often, they will hear from the positive case before they hear from the Health Department.

- If one of your staff is contacted by a positive case who tells them that they are or will be listed as a close contact, allow that person to stay home until the close contacts are officially identified and given an order to quarantine.
- Only people who meet the definition of a close contact during a positive case's infectious period, and who are contacted by the Health Department, have to quarantine.
- A contact of a close contact is not a close contact. If staff has been around someone who is quarantined as a close contact, but who has not yet tested positive for COVID, OR if they've been around someone who is being tested for COVID-19, that staff person is not required to quarantine or be absent from work. However, it is absolutely essential for the business to follow all the proactive requirements that reduce the spread of COVID-19 (See Section 1).

8. What to do if you think the employee has not identified all their close contacts at work:

- The Health Department relies heavily on the employee to identify who they were in close contact with during their contagious period, but we also know that some close contacts may be overlooked during the initial investigation.
- If you believe you or some of your staff members were not identified as close contacts but should have been, ask the employee to add those people to their close contact list.

9. What does it mean for the business when an employee is positive for COVID-19?

- **Closing Temporarily:**
  - Whether a business must temporarily close when an employee tests positive for COVID-19 is based on each specific situation. These closures are usually done voluntarily by the business after consulting with the case investigator. Examples of situations that may require temporary closure are:
    - If needed to complete additional cleaning and sanitization.
    - If the business does not have enough staff to operate because a significant percentage of staff had to be quarantined.

- **Required Cleaning:**
  - The Health Department relies on CDC's Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility, for guidance. One thing to note, however, is that even if the employee has not been in the building for 7 days, if any of the employee's close contacts have worked within the last 7 days, the additional cleaning and sanitizing is needed.

- **Notifying the Public:**
  - MCCHD only announces a COVID-19 case at a business if/when needed to identify additional close contacts, or if it will allow customers to take steps to protect themselves, friends, and family.
  - The decision is based on what type and how much contact staff had with the public, during the employee's contagious period.
  - The Health Department will let the business know before announcing it to the public. It usually works best when the business and the Health Department can cooperate and coordinate the message and timing.
  - MCCHD will not identify the employee when making such an announcement.
  - Some businesses choose to tell their customers even when the Health Department does not require it.