What to do when your co-worker has COVID-19

June 7, 2021

Learning that a co-worker has tested positive for COVID-19 can be stressful, but there are actions you can take to stay safe.

This guidance is for unvaccinated people. If you are fully vaccinated – it has been 14 days since your final shot – you do not need to quarantine if you are a close contact of someone with COVID-19.

This guidance is for general work sites. More specific guidance from certain sectors, such as congregate living facilities, health care facilities, and critical care infrastructure workers, supersedes this guidance.

How will I know if my co-worker tested positive?

Your co-worker may tell you directly, your employer may tell you, or you may receive a call from the Health Department if you had possible close contact with a co-worker who tested positive.

There may be misinformation circulating and concerns about getting COVID-19 among co-workers. Remember to treat your co-workers with respect and confidentiality.

Why might the Health Department call me?

When a person tests positive for COVID-19, the Health Department contacts them to find out who they were in close contact with during their infectious period (beginning two days before the start of symptoms or two days before a positive test result for people who did not have symptoms). Close contact means being within 6 feet of each other for a total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period. The Health Department will follow up with each close contact to assess their risk for COVID-19 and provide information about staying home and the importance of getting tested.

When would I need to quarantine and stay home from work?

If you were in close contact with someone with COVID-19 while they were infectious and you are not fully vaccinated, you should quarantine for 14 days. Day 0 is the last day you had contact with that person. There may be some exceptions on quarantine guidance based on your type of employment and staffing capacity. The Health Department will provide you with specific guidance and next steps to take.

You can get tested on or after day 7 of quarantine, if you have had no symptoms. The test must be for a current infection (like a PCR test). It cannot be an antigen test (also known as a rapid test). If your test is negative and you still don’t have symptoms, you may end quarantine early and go back to work. You must continue to monitor yourself for symptoms for the full 14 days. This option is not available to those who work in close congregate settings where there is a high risk of transmitting COVID-19 to vulnerable people, such as assisted living and detention facilities.

For both close contacts and people who tested positive: Employers should not require proof of a negative test for COVID-19 to return to work. The Health Department does not provide letters for employees who test positive, or their close contacts, to return to work or to be excused from work.

If you were not in close contact with someone with COVID-19 while they were infectious, you may go to work. You do not need to quarantine.
What else should I know about COVID-19?

- Diseases can make anyone sick regardless of their race or ethnicity. Fear and anxiety about COVID-19 can cause people to avoid or reject others even though they are not at risk for spreading the virus.

- COVID-19 spreads when an infected person breathes out droplets and very small particles that contain the virus when they cough, sneeze, sing, talk, or breathe.

- People can spread the virus that causes COVID-19 up to two days before they have symptoms. However, some people with COVID-19 do not have any symptoms.

- If you are not fully vaccinated, you can prevent getting COVID-19 by wearing a mask and staying at least 6 feet away from other people who are not fully vaccinated.

- Stay home from work if you develop a fever of over 100.4 °F, chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, or diarrhea. Contact your health care provider for testing.

- Clean your hands often, either with soap and water for 20 seconds or a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.

- Avoid sharing items or workspaces with others and thoroughly clean workspaces prior to working and after you are done for the day.

- People who test positive should not return to work until they have recovered.

- Someone who has completed quarantine or has been released from isolation does not pose a risk of infection to other people.

- Clean and disinfect areas that were used within the last 24 hours by someone who tested positive for COVID-19. If it has been more than 24 hours, cleaning is enough. If it has been more than 3 days since the positive person was in the area, no additional cleaning (beyond regular cleaning) is needed.

Where can I find more information and support?

- Vermont’s COVID-19 Website
- COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions
- Coping with Stress for Workers (CDC)
- COVID-19 information for your community, work and school (CDC)
- What to do if you are a close contact of someone with COVID-19