



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

UPDATED June 8, 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 <http://www.sfdcp.org>. This interim guidance may change as knowledge, community transmission, and availability of PPE and testing change.

**AUDIENCE:** People who 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 non-SNF healthcare workers and first responders. This guidance does NOT apply to staff at skilled nursing facilities (SNF) who have more stringent criteria to return to work after being diagnosed with COVID-19. Please see <http://www.sfdcp.org/covid19hcp> for guidance specific to SNF staff under “Long Term Care and Senior Care.”

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

### Summary of Changes to Guidance from 5/12/2020

- Clarifies the preference for using symptom- and time-based criteria over test-based criteria

Note that these guidelines should not be used by people who work in [Skilled Nursing Facilities, which have different requirements](#).

### BACKGROUND:

**Confirmed COVID-19**, means that you were tested for the COVID-19 virus and you learned that the test result was positive for COVID-19 – regardless of whether you have symptoms.

**Suspected COVID-19** means that you have any ONE of the following signs or symptoms, which are new or not explained by another reason:

- Fever, Chills, or Repeated Shaking/Shivering
- Cough
- Sore Throat
- Shortness of Breath, Difficulty Breathing
- Feeling Unusually Weak or Fatigued
- New Loss of Taste or Smell
- Muscle pain
- Headache
- Runny or congested nose
- Diarrhea

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 return to work sooner. If you choose not to be tested you MUST stay out of work for at least 10 calendar days per the instructions below.

#### If you need to be tested

- Contact your healthcare provider; or
- Sign up for free testing at CityTestSF <https://sf.gov/get-tested-covid-19-citytestsf>; or
- If you live outside of San Francisco, you can check with the county where you live for other testing options.



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

There are three options for people who have Confirmed or Suspected COVID-19 to be able to end isolation and return to work.

SFDPH **strongly encourages** the use of symptom- and time-based criteria described in Option 1 and Option 2 below rather than Option 3 (see rationale below)

1. **OPTION 1 (Symptom-based criteria):** If you have Confirmed COVID-19 **or** Suspected COVID-19 and you did not get tested for COVID-19, you can leave isolation and go back to work when all the following are true:
  - a. You have had at least 3 days in a row with no fever at all; AND
  - b. During those 3 days you have not taken any fever-reducing medication such as Tylenol, Acetaminophen, Advil, Ibuprofen, Aleve, or Naproxen; AND
  - c. You have had at least 3 days of improved cough or shortness of breath if you had these symptoms; AND
  - d. It has been at least 10 days since your symptoms first started.

Note that because people may continue to test positive on a viral test long after they are recovered from COVID-19, you can end isolation/return to work if all of a, b, c, and d are true even if you have one or more positive viral tests beyond 10 days after your symptoms first started. If you meet all the criteria for Option 1 you are considered not contagious, even if you have a positive test.

OR

2. **OPTION 2 (Time-based criteria):** If you have Confirmed COVID-19 but never had symptoms, you can return to work 10 days after the date of your positive test.

OR

3. **OPTION 3 (Test-based criteria):** If you have Confirmed COVID-19 and have two negative viral test results from at least two consecutive respiratory specimens collected more than 24 hours apart you can return to work as soon as you get the second negative test result as long as you don't have a fever AND haven't been using fever reducing medication AND respiratory symptoms (if you had them) are getting better over the previous three days.

Generally **DPH discourages Option 3** because most people with Confirmed COVID-19 will continue to have positive viral tests for several weeks even though they are not contagious. This is because dead virus particles can still show up as a positive viral test but are not considered contagious. Choosing Option 3 will likely lead to people being out from work for longer than they need to be.



**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? Can I go back to work sooner than 10 days after my symptoms started?**

If you have never had a positive test for COVID-19 (i.e. you do NOT have Confirmed COVID-19) but you have one of the symptoms listed on Page 1, then you have Suspected COVID-19 and you may be able to go back to work sooner if you get a single negative test and you feel better. Check with your healthcare provider or occupational safety office to help make this decision.

**In general, for those with Suspected COVID-19, after a single negative test you should still remain isolated until it has been 3 days since your last fever AND you have had 3 days of improving symptoms.**

This is because the test is not perfect and you may actually have COVID-19 despite the negative test. Remaining isolated for at least 3 days keeps those around you and our community safer. Because the test is not perfect, if you are in close contact with persons who are at higher risk of severe disease from COVID-19 (see [www.sfdcp.org/vulnerable](http://www.sfdcp.org/vulnerable)), you may consider remaining isolated for at least 10 days since you first had symptoms.

**Do I need to be tested to go back to work?**

No, you do not need to be tested to go back to work.

If you have Confirmed COVID-19 (see above) then you can follow the above SFDPH strongly recommends Options 1 and 2, which do not require you be tested to end isolation. SFDPH generally discourages use of Option 3 because it will likely lead to people being out for work for longer than they need to be. Note that serology testing for antibodies is not necessary for anyone to be able to go back to work;

If you have Suspected COVID-19 (see above) and have not yet been tested, the San Francisco Department of Public Health **strongly encourages you to get tested for COVID-19** because if you get tested and you test negative, you may be able to return to work after you have felt better for three days.

**What does it mean if I have a positive test and it has been more than 10 days since my symptoms started? 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 (Option 1 or Option 2).

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

No. Generally speaking, SFDPH discourages non-healthcare businesses and employers from requiring a note to return to work. If you meet the criteria described in 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.



## 2. What else do I need to know to return to work?

Be sure to wash your hands frequently.

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

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

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

Check to see if your employer may have additional policies and procedures for returning to work if you have 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 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.sfchcp.org/covid19hcp](http://www.sfchcp.org/covid19hcp) under "Long Term Care and Senior Care."

## 4. 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.

Close Contact is defined as:

- living in the same household or being an intimate partner of someone who has Confirmed COVID-19,
- spending more than 10 minutes within 6 feet of someone with Confirmed COVID-19 who was not wearing a face mask, or
- having direct contact for any amount of time with bodily fluids and/or secretions of someone with Confirmed COVID-19 (e.g., was coughed or sneezed on, shared utensils with, or was provided care by or provided care for them without wearing a mask, gown, and gloves)

at any time during the period starting 48 hours before the person with COVID-19's symptoms began (or the date of their positive test if the person with COVID-19 had no symptoms).

If you have had Close Contact and:

- If you do not develop any symptoms, you can end quarantine 14 days after your last close contact with the confirmed COVID-19 case;



- If you get a positive COVID-19 test, then you have Confirmed COVID-19 and you can end isolation using one of the three options described 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. 2020-02b for who is defined as an Essential COVID-19 Response Worker at [www.sfdcp.org/covid19](http://www.sfdcp.org/covid19) under “Isolation and Quarantine Directives.”

## Resources

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

- San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFPDH)
  - <https://www.sfdcp.org/covid19>
- 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>