

Healthcare Worker Return to Work Guidance after Infection or Exposure to a Respiratory Viral Pathogen

The purpose of this document is to provide return to work guidance for healthcare personnel (HCP) after a respiratory viral infection.

Background

The West Virginia Department of Health (WVDH) has developed guidance for healthcare workers (HCW) with suspected or confirmed COVID-19, seasonal influenza (flu), and other acute respiratory virus infections, regardless of whether diagnostic testing is performed or the results of such testing.

Work exclusion for HCW with contagious illness is one tool to reduce transmission risk to patients, residents, and other HCW in healthcare settings. Work exclusion policies for HCW should balance the reduction of respiratory virus transmission with healthcare staffing challenges that may be exacerbated by prolonged exclusion requirements.

Definitions

Healthcare worker (HCW) means any person who is temporarily or permanently employed by or volunteering in a healthcare facility, including contract workers, and has or may have direct contact with a patient in that healthcare facility.

Healthcare settings refer to places where healthcare is delivered and includes, but is not limited to, acute care facilities, long-term acute care facilities, inpatient rehabilitation facilities, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, home health care, and outpatient facilities such as dialysis centers, physician offices, and others.

Respiratory viruses are viruses that cause illnesses in the respiratory system. These illnesses share similar symptoms, risk factors, and prevention strategies. Common examples include flu, COVID-19, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), human metapneumovirus, adenovirus, rhinovirus/enterovirus (common cold), parainfluenza, and parvovirus B19 (Fifth Disease).

Recommendations

HCW who meet either of the following criteria should be excluded from work:

- Tested positive for a respiratory virus like COVID-19, flu, or RSV, or
- Exhibiting two or more symptoms of a respiratory virus illness such as cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, runny nose, headache, myalgia, chills, fatigue, or fever.

HCW with respiratory virus symptoms may return to work if:

- At least three days have passed since symptom onset (day 0 is symptom onset date, with return to work on day 4), and
- Symptoms are improving, including being fever-free without the use of fever reducing medications for 24 hours, and
- They feel well enough to work.

HCW who are asymptomatic but tested positive for a respiratory virus may return to work if at least three days have passed since their test date (day 0 is positive test date, with return to work on day 4).

Testing is not required for returning to work:

After a HCW returns to work they should wear a surgical or higher-level mask for source control at least seven days after onset (day 8 is the first day the mask may be removed).

Asymptomatic HCW who have been exposed to someone with a respiratory virus do not need to be restricted from work as long as they:

- Remain asymptomatic, and
- Wear a surgical or higher-level mask for as source control for five days after exposure, and
- Self-monitor for symptoms for five days after exposure.