

# COVID-19 Return to Work Guide for Health Care Workers

Safety is the most important thing during the COVID-19 pandemic and there are a lot of different feelings around symptoms, self-isolation, and testing. This guide will help you understand when it is appropriate to return to work after you have experienced symptoms, been tested for COVID-19, or been self-isolating. Expedited returns to work will only be considered in exceptional circumstances and must be discussed with your leader and approved by Zone Emergency Operations Centres.

## 1) I've been told to self-isolate for 14 days—can I go back to work sooner if I test negative for COVID-19?

- If you've recently travelled or been exposed to COVID-19 (e.g., close contact\* to a patient with COVID-19 without appropriate [personal protective equipment](#)), then you are legally required (under public health order) to self-isolate for a full 14 days. This is called quarantine.
- When someone is infected with a contagious disease, there is some time between being exposed and becoming sick. People who get COVID-19 disease usually start developing symptoms 2 to 14 days after exposure. By isolating during this time, it protects others from being exposed to a potentially infectious person.
- Not everyone requires testing. People who don't have the main COVID-19 symptoms will not be tested. As a healthcare worker, you will be tested for COVID-19 if you have any of fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, sore throat, or a runny nose.
- If you develop a fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, sore throat, or a runny nose that is not related to a pre-existing illness or health condition during your 14-day self-isolation, then you must take the online [COVID-19 self-assessment](#) or call Health Link at 811 for additional guidance.
- Health care workers who have not been tested but who have symptoms (fever, cough, sore throat, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing or a runny nose) and a known exposure must not work in a health care setting for 14 days since symptom onset AND until symptoms are gone – whichever is longer.
- For example: This individual would have to self-isolate for 10 days after symptom onset (day 15) from all public places, but could not return to work until day 19, to allow for 14 days to pass since symptoms began even though the symptoms have gone away.

Day	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
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Day 1:  
Start of  
quarantine

Day 5:  
Symptoms  
start

Day 11:  
Symptoms  
are gone

Day 15:  
Self-isolation  
ends

Day 19:  
Return to  
work

- If you develop a fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, sore throat, or a runny nose during your 14-day self-isolation and you are tested and it comes back negative, then you can go back to work after your 14-day self-isolation AND after your symptoms resolve – **whichever is longer.**
- If you develop any other new onset symptoms that are not related to a pre-existing illness or health condition during your 14-day self-isolation, then you must continue to self-isolate for the 14 days AND until your symptoms are gone **whichever is longer.**
- If you don't have any symptoms during your 14-day self-isolation, then you can go back to work when the full 14 days of self-isolation are complete.

**2) I don't believe I've been exposed to COVID-19 and I didn't travel outside Canada in the past 2 weeks, but I was referred for COVID-19 testing because I have a respiratory illness (e.g., cough, sore throat). My test came back negative—when can I go back to work?**

- Even if you didn't travel or do not believe you were exposed, you are legally required (under public health order) to self-isolate for 10 days if you have developed a cough, fever, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, sore throat, or a runny nose that is not related to a pre-existing illness or health condition. Healthcare workers who develop any of those symptoms must take the online [COVID-19 self-assessment](#) or call Health Link at 811 for additional guidance.
- If you are tested for COVID-19 because you were symptomatic did not have travel or have a known exposure in the past 2 weeks and your test comes back negative, then you can stop your self-isolation once your symptoms are gone. Healthcare workers can't work when they aren't well. Note that a cough may persist for several weeks after recovering from a viral respiratory illness, but this does not mean that the individual with the post-viral cough is infectious. Someone who has recovered from a viral respiratory illness but still has a cough (and no other symptoms) does not need to continue to self-isolate.
- If you have certain symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, sore throat, or runny nose), but you did not travel or have a known exposure in the past two weeks and **you were never tested for COVID-19**, then you are legally required (under public health order) to self-isolate for 10 days from when your symptoms started, or until your symptoms are gone, **whichever is longer**. Healthcare workers can't work when they aren't well.
- If you have any other new onset symptoms that are not related to a pre-existing illness or health condition, then you must remain off work and limit contact with others until your symptoms resolve. Healthcare workers can't work when they aren't well.

**3) I wasn't exposed to COVID-19 and I haven't travelled outside Canada within the past 2 weeks, but I'm not feeling well. When I used the online [COVID-19 self-assessment](#), it indicated that I don't need to be tested for COVID-19. When can I go back to work?**

- If you develop any other new onset symptoms that are not related to a pre-existing illness or health condition, then you must remain off work and limit contact with others until your symptoms resolve. Healthcare workers can't work when they aren't well.
- Continue to monitor for the following symptoms: fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, sore throat, or runny nose. If you do develop any of those symptoms, then stay home and take the [COVID-19 self-assessment](#) again.

**4) My partner is isolating and doesn't have any symptoms. I don't have any symptoms either. Do I need to self-isolate?**

- If the person you live with doesn't have any symptoms and you don't either, then you don't need to self-isolate. You can go to work like normal *unless* you've travelled outside Canada within the past 2 weeks or you've had another possible COVID-19 exposure – such as close contact\* with someone who has COVID-19 without wearing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).

**5) My partner is isolating and has symptoms. We're just waiting for test results. I don't have any**

### symptoms—do I need to self-isolate?

- If your partner got symptoms within 14 days of being in close contact\* with someone with laboratory confirmed COVID-19, then you need to self-isolate too, because your partner would be considered a probable case. You should self-isolate for 14 days, starting from the last time you had close contact\* with your partner.
- If your partner got symptoms within 14 days of returning from travel outside Canada, then you need to self-isolate for 14 days starting from the last time you had close contact\* with your partner.
- If your partner hasn't travelled outside Canada in the last 2 weeks and has not had any known exposure to the COVID-19 virus, then you don't need to self-isolate and you can work like normal unless you develop symptoms. If you develop symptoms, then you must self-isolate and take the online [COVID-19 self-assessment](#) or call Health Link at 811 for additional guidance.

### 6) I've had a nagging cough since January. My manager told me that I should stay home until the cough is gone, but I feel fine otherwise. Is it safe for me to go to work?

- COVID-19 usually causes new symptoms or makes chronic symptoms much worse. If you have a chronic symptom like a cough, that hasn't really changed much for weeks (or months), and you've seen a doctor and you don't currently have an infection that you could pass onto someone else, then it's okay for you to work.
- It's okay for people with a chronic cough or reactive airway disease to go back to work after they've been sick if they're still coughing, as long as it's not worse and they don't have any other symptoms.

### 7) I had some symptoms last week, so I decided to self-isolate. I haven't travelled and don't believe I've been exposed to anyone with COVID-19. My symptoms are better now and I was never tested for COVID-19. Do I need to stay off work for the full 14 days of self-isolation?

- A 14-day self-isolation period is required if you have been potentially exposed to the COVID-19 virus (such as recent travel or close contact\* to a patient with COVID-19 without appropriate personal protective equipment). See question #1 regarding 14-day self-isolation requirements, as well as the online [COVID-19 self-assessment](#).
- Any healthcare worker who has developed a cough, fever, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, sore throat, or a runny nose that is not related to a pre-existing illness or health condition must take the online [COVID-19 self-assessment](#) or call Health Link at 811 for additional guidance.
- If you've had these symptoms but haven't travelled or had any known exposure to COVID-19, and you haven't been tested, then you should self-isolate for 10 days after your symptoms started OR until your symptoms are gone—**whichever is longer**.
- If you have any other new onset symptoms that are not related to a pre-existing illness or health condition, then you must remain off work and limit contact with others until your symptoms resolve. Healthcare workers can't work when they aren't well.

### 8) I tested positive for COVID-19. When can I go back to work?

- If you have tested positive for COVID-19, then you are legally required to self-isolate for at least 10 days from when your symptoms started or until your symptoms are gone, whichever is longer.
- Healthcare workers have additional requirements and may not work in any health care setting until 14 days have passed since symptoms started AND symptoms have resolved, whichever is longer.

**\*Close Contact** is defined as a person who:

- provided care for the patient, including healthcare workers, family members or other caregivers, or who had other similar close physical contact without consistent and appropriate use of [personal protective equipment](#)  
OR
- who lived with/otherwise had close prolonged contact (within 2 metres) with the person while they were infectious  
OR
- had direct contact with infectious bodily fluids of the person (e.g. was coughed or sneezed on) while not wearing recommended [personal protective equipment](#).