

COVID-19: Update #22

School Reopening and Recommendations for Students with COVID-19 Symptoms

Updated: Directives and Guidance Documents

Attention: Physicians, Emergency Departments, Infection Control Practitioners, Occupational Health Practitioners, Walk-In Clinics/Urgent Care Clinics, Nurse Practitioners, EMS, Designated Officers, Midwives, Family Health Teams, Pharmacies, Central LHIN, NSM LHIN, Beausoleil First Nation, Moose Deer Point First Nation, Rama First Nation, Wahta First Nation, Long-term Care Homes, Retirement Homes, Hospices

Date: September 2, 2020

Updated: September 4, 2020 (Revised guidance regarding household members of symptomatic individuals)

The Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) has seen an increase in case counts over the last two consecutive weeks with 14 cases reported between August 16 and August 22, and 22 cases reported between August 23 and August 29. There has also been an increase in the number of close contacts identified per case. Additionally, there are currently two confirmed institutional outbreaks in long term care homes in our region. Although we have seen an increase in cases, the percent positivity rates remain low with Simcoe County at 0.2% and 0% in the District of Muskoka, compared to the provincial percent positivity rate of 0.4%. The most current case counts for laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases in the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) region are available at [Simcoe Muskoka Health Stats](#)ⁱ.

School Reopening

As you are aware, schools reopen across Simcoe Muskoka starting on September 8th. The Ontario Ministry of Health has provided a [COVID-19 Guidance: School Outbreak Management](#)ⁱⁱ document that provides information for local public health units investigating cases and outbreaks associated with elementary or secondary (i.e., K-12) school settings. It is intended to supplement existing public health guidance on the [Management of Cases and Contacts of COVID-19](#)ⁱⁱⁱ in Ontario. The Ministry of Education also released [Operational Guidance: COVID-19 Management in Schools](#)^{iv} intended to support school boards and school authorities in preparation for the safe reopening of schools for the 2020-2021 school year. This operational document also applies to child care centres and before/after school programs that operate within schools. To supplement this information, the SMDHU has also created a local [Supplemental Guidance document](#)^v for our schools and school boards.

Key areas of relevance to health care providers:

Screening

Staff and students/attendees are required to self-screen daily prior to school attendance. Screening will include new onset of [symptoms of COVID-19](#)^{vi} (including atypical symptoms for children), travel outside of Canada within the past 14 days, or close physical contact with someone in the last 14 days who either:

- tested positive for COVID-19;
- is currently sick with new COVID-19 symptoms; or
- has returned from outside of Canada in the last 2 weeks with new COVID-19 symptoms.



Symptomatic Individuals

Students, staff and essential visitors who have any COVID-19 symptoms persisting for more than a few hours, and for whom the symptom is new and not related to seasonal allergies or pre-existing medical conditions, must stay home from school and should be tested for COVID-19. These individuals will be directed to [local assessment centres](#)^{vii} for testing. A nasopharyngeal (NP) swab is the most sensitive for COVID-19 testing, but if it will not be tolerated by a child then a throat swab is an alternative available for children at all assessment centres.

If results are negative, the individual can return to school 24 hours after symptoms resolve. Note: Mild symptoms known to persist in young children (e.g., runny nose) may be ongoing at time of return to school if other symptoms have been resolved and there is a negative test.

Individuals may seek consultation from their health care provider (HCP), as usual, if they believe symptoms are due to an alternative diagnosis. **COVID-19 symptoms may be mild and do overlap with other viral illnesses, and a clinical diagnosis to rule out COVID-19 is very difficult. Erring on the side of testing is highly encouraged to ensure accurate diagnosis, public health surveillance and early outbreak prevention and control. If the HCP is confident of an alternative diagnosis and provides it to the individual, they can return to school when symptoms are resolved for at least 24 hours.**

If the individual chooses not to be tested for COVID-19 and there is not a known and firm alternative diagnosis, then the individual must self-isolate for 14 days from symptom onset.

If the individual tests positive for COVID-19, SMDHU will follow up promptly with them for case and contact management, including guidance on when they can return to school.

The Ministry of Health school outbreak management guidance indicates that medical notes or proof of negative tests should not be required for staff or students to return to school after an illness.

Any household members of the ill individual are to [self-monitor](#)^{viii} for 14 days (i.e. no longer required to self-isolate). This is consistent with revisions anticipated shortly to the provincial self-assessment tool. These household contacts can continue to go to school and work as long as they have not developed symptoms themselves and their ill household member has not been diagnosed with COVID-19.

Mask Exemptions

All students from grades 4-12 are required to wear non-medical masks (face coverings) in school and during before/after school child care. Children in JK – grade 3 are encouraged to do so (to the extent that they are able). Any of our school boards may choose to require mask use for children in some/all grades under grade 4. All staff (school-based or child care-based) are required to wear medical masks, with eye protection which is provided for use by school boards/employers and recommended by SMDHU.

There will be reasonable exemptions to mask wearing for medical conditions of both staff and students. While SMDHU has not required local school boards and child care operators to receive proof of a medical exemption by a HCP, many school boards in Simcoe and Muskoka have decided to do so. For example, they may accept a health condition already on file, and otherwise will request new documentation. There is no widely accepted list of conditions for which medical exemption should be provided. As such, it is an individual assessment by the HCP. However, SMDHU's [requirement for mask wearing](#)^{ix} in the general community includes the following exemptions relevant to school-age children:

- Individuals with medical conditions rendering them unable to safely wear a mask, including those with breathing difficulties or cognitive difficulties or difficulties in hearing or processing information.
- Anyone who is unable to remove the mask without help.

Given the small potential for adverse reactions to mask wearing (such as headache for those prone to headaches, increased sense of dyspnea, etc.), providing education to patients on how to mitigate these challenges, as well as how to address possible population specific difficulties with mask wearing (such as health or neurodevelopmental disorders that result in sensory or other issues that render wearing a mask difficult, if not impossible) may be beneficial^x. For example, for patients with anxiety about mask use here is a link to a [video^{xi}](#) that may help.

When families are choosing masks, those with exhalation valves are not recommended, as they don't protect others from COVID-19 and don't limit the spread of the virus.

Return to School Communications

To support families, administrators and educators, we have created a [Return to School^{xii}](#) section of our website under COVID-19. You are welcome to direct your patients to this resource. Patients can also be directed to our COVID-19 phone line which is accessible from Monday to Friday 8:30 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. and Saturdays from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Updated Directives and Guidance Documents

CMOH [Directive #3 for Long-Term Care Homes^{xiii}](#) – August 28, 2020

- Updates include parameters around short stay and temporary absences.

[COVID-19 Advice: Religious Services, Rites or Ceremonies^{xiv}](#) – August 21, 2020

- Updates include allowances for certain activities (including singing, sharing of objects and materials) with control measures in place.

All suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 must be reported to SMDHU. Additionally, if an outbreak or cluster is suspected at one location (for example if you are seeing an increase in testing of symptomatic individuals from one location), please ensure to report that as well. To report a suspect or confirmed case of COVID-19 or suspected outbreaks, please contact the Infectious Diseases team at (705) 721-7520 extension 8809 during business hours (Monday to Friday 8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.) or after hours at 1-888-225-7851. SMDHU will lead in the investigation and management of all cases, their contacts, and in all outbreaks, in keeping with our mandate within the [COVID 19 Guidance: School Outbreak Management](#) document.

There are a number of other resources and documents available through our Health Professional Portal at www.smdhu.org/hportal as well as through [Public Health Ontario^{xv}](#) and the [Government of Ontario^{xvi}](#).

ⁱ <http://www.simcoemuskokahealthstats.org/topics/infectious-diseases/a-h/covid-19>

ⁱⁱ <https://files.ontario.ca/moh-covid-19-guidance-school-outbreak-management-en-2020-08-26-v2.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/2019_guidance.aspx

^{iv} <https://www.ontario.ca/page/operational-guidance-covid-19-management-schools>

^v https://www.simcoemuskokahealth.org/docs/default-source/COVID-/Return-to-school/covid-19supplementalguidance_schools-final_aoda-web.pdf?sfvrsn=4

^{vi} <https://www.ontario.ca/page/covid-19-stop-spread#section-0>

^{vii} <https://www.simcoemuskokahealth.org/Topics/COVID-19/AssessmentCentresandTesting>

^{viii} <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/factsheet-covid-19-self-monitor.pdf?la=en>

^{ix} <https://www.simcoemuskokahealth.org/docs/default-source/COVID-/20200707-face-covering-indoor-spaces-faq-public.pdf?sfvrsn=20>

^x <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/ppih/if-ppih-covid-19-sag-evidence-of-harm-from-mask-use-for-specific-populations.pdf>

^{xi} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxyvIU7Kiks&feature=youtu.be>

^{xii} <https://www.simcoemuskokahealth.org/Topics/COVID-19/Return-to-School>

^{xiii} http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/directives/LTCH_HPPA.pdf

^{xiv} http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/advice_religious_services.pdf

^{xv} <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/>

^{xvi} http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/2019_guidance.aspx.