

Maura J. Rossman, M.D., Health Officer

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Dear Howard County Community,

The hazy, hot, and humid days of August are upon us and many families are getting ready for back to school routines. COVID has disrupted all of our lives and remains a serious challenge to our community. But due to our diligence and adherence to evidence-based strategies that prevent transmission and reduce serious disease, this fall will be the most normal back to school in years. This year, families will have many options to consider in regard to managing COVID risks. Families should inquire about their child's school COVID policies and about what mitigation strategies the school is deploying to make school as safe as possible.

Each family has individual factors that contribute to their personal choices. Every family will need to make decisions about how cautious they want to be to avoid COVID and potential complications. Families with older relatives and members with chronic health conditions may want to be stricter with prevention efforts as these individuals are at greater risk for complications from COVID. Other families may want to relax some strategies due to social, emotional and learning factors. To make the best choices, all families should consider the following when making decisions about their child's return to school.

- **Risk** – All families should understand their risk for serious illness with COVID-19. Use the [COVID-19 Community Level](#) to decide what protective action to take. Check out CDC's list of conditions that may increase your risk for serious illness [here](#).
- **Vaccination** – Everyone over the age of 6 months should be up to date, including boosters. Vaccination greatly reduces the severity of COVID, including the possibility of hospitalization and death. Families are encouraged to discuss any questions or concerns with their child's healthcare provider. Locate County vaccination clinics [here](#).
- **Masking** – Wearing a well-fitting mask reduces the chance of getting COVID. Families should check CDC community levels or COVID indicators to understand the risk of COVID transmission in their community and assess their personal risk factors. Some families will choose to mask as much as possible, while others will choose to forgo masking in some or most settings. For some families, not wearing a mask is worth the risk of getting COVID. For others who want to avoid COVID as much as possible, mask wearing is worth the effort. If a person tests positive, they should wear a mask through day 10 or use 2 negative antigen tests to decide when to stop wearing a mask after 5 days of isolation. If a person is exposed to COVID-19, they should wear a mask indoors when around others for 10 days.
- **Symptoms** – Everyone should stay home if they develop symptoms of COVID until they are cleared by a medical provider, test negative, or isolate according to [CDC guidance](#). Symptoms include fever, muscle or body aches, coughing, congestion or a runny nose, difficulty breathing, diarrhea, or fatigue.
- **Testing** – Rapid antigen testing kits are available for home use and PCR tests are available at testing sites throughout Howard County. All persons with symptoms of COVID should isolate and test themselves as soon as possible. People at high risk for severe illness should talk with their doctor about treatment. A person with symptoms who has a positive rapid antigen test, or a positive PCR test is considered infected with COVID. A negative antigen test, in a person with symptoms should be repeated in 24 – 48 hours. A negative PCR indicates no current COVID infection and should be repeated if the individual develops new symptoms. You can locate at-home testing kits and County testing sites [here](#).

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- **Isolation** – If a person tests positive, they should stay home and away from others. Isolation may end on day 6 or later if the person never has symptoms, or if the person is fever free for 24 hours and other symptoms have improved. All people who test positive should wear a mask through day 10 or use 2 negative antigen tests to decide when to stop wearing a mask after 5 days of isolation. Use [this guide](#) from the CDC to help you determine what actions to take.
- **Exposure** – If a person is exposed to someone with COVID, they should observe for symptoms for 10 days. When indoors and around others, they should wear a mask for 10 days. They should test themselves 5 days after exposure or sooner if they develop symptoms. They should also take extra precautions for 10 days when around people more likely to get very sick. Use [this guide](#) from the CDC to help you determine what actions to take.
- **Outbreaks** – If an outbreak occurs in school, you will be notified by your child’s school. There may be different recommendations for testing, masking, isolation, quarantine and other prevention strategies.
- **Large events, sports and social engagements** – Currently, there are no restrictions in place with regard to events and gatherings. Participation in large group activities increases the risk of COVID transmission. However, families should weigh the benefits of participating in these activities compared to the risk of getting COVID. For some, the benefits will outweigh the risks of COVID. Students who do participate can reduce the risk of adverse outcomes by layering multiple strategies. For example, a student who is fully vaccinated and boosted and who wears a mask can greatly reduce the chance of severe COVID compared to an unvaccinated student.

Best wishes for a safe and fun school year. HCHD will continue to monitor the impact of COVID. New and updated information will be posted on our website, www.hchealth.org.



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