

COVID-19 and schools: Information for families



Many children and youth who moved to remote learning after the 2021-22 holiday break are now returning to in-person school. With increased spread of the Omicron variant, and changes to testing protocols and reporting, many families are concerned about what will happen when students go back to school.

The Canadian Paediatric Society is one of many organizations that spoke in favour of in-person learning in safe environments. We did this because paediatricians and other health professionals working with children and youth have seen many harms associated with school closures.

Vaccines—which are now available for all Canadians over the age of 5 years—are very effective at preventing serious illness from COVID-19. The many benefits of in-person learning for children and youth are far greater than the risk from the virus.

What we know about COVID-19 and schools

How much COVID-19 there is in a school usually reflects the level of virus circulating in the community. The available information suggests that closing schools has a far smaller effect on community spread than other public health measures. Studies from British Columbia—where schools have been open since May 2020—show few transmissions in school.

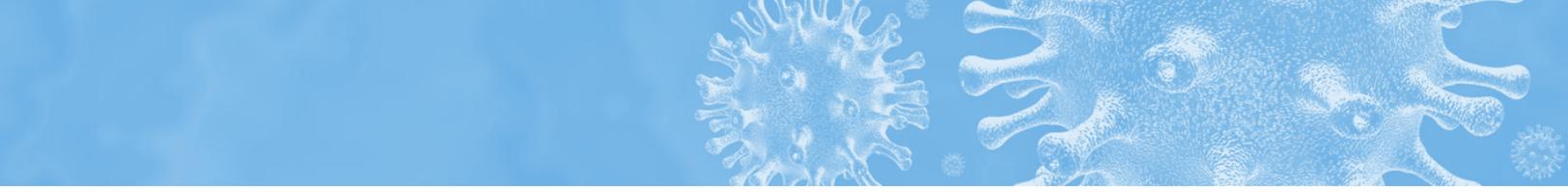
Of course, this may be different with Omicron, which means we need to continue to take steps to reduce the risk while children and youth are in school: getting vaccinated; ensuring quality ventilation; testing; wearing high-quality masks; and staying home when sick.

Remember that the best protection comes from combining all these measures. When all these precautions in place, schools are low-risk settings for spreading COVID-19.

Why in-person school is important

Child and youth mental health has suffered over the course of the pandemic. Paediatricians and other professionals have seen more children and youth with depression and anxiety, thoughts of suicide, eating disorders, learning losses, and delayed development. Research supports what health care professionals are seeing in their clinics.

Social isolation—being apart from their friends and peers, and from teachers and other trusted adults—is at the root of many of these problems. Researchers are also seeing the effects of extended periods of screen time.



Apart from academics, being in school has many positive effects on students' health and well-being. Many benefit from school breakfast and other nutrition programs, or receive supports like speech-language, psychology, or physical/occupational therapy. And all children and youth benefit from non-academic activities such as physical education, art, and music.

What you can do

Students and families can do many things to help reduce the spread of COVID-19:

- **Get vaccinated:** Ensure everyone in your household who can be vaccinated against COVID-19 is up-to-date with those vaccines. Right now, children 5 to 17 should receive two doses. Adults over 18 years should receive two doses, plus a booster (three in total). Contact local public health authorities for information about when and where to receive vaccines.
- **Wear properly fitted masks:** Remind your child to wear their mask securely, both in school and on the bus.
- **Stay home when you are sick or having symptoms** of viral illness, including COVID-19. Children who have COVID-19 symptoms should not go to school. Check the website of your province/territory or local public health authority for symptom screening tools.
- **Reduce the number of contacts** you have, as much as possible.
- **Use at-home tests when experiencing symptoms of COVID-19:** While supplies of rapid antigen tests (RATs) have recently been limited, provinces and territories are expected to have more available in the coming days and weeks. In some places, tests will be provided to school staff and students.
- **Find out what is happening at your school:** Many schools boards have put information about safety measures—including mask availability and ventilation—on their websites.

We understand that the level of risk is not the same for all families. For example, if an elderly grandparent with lung disease lives with you, or there is a family member with an immunodeficiency in your home, you may choose to wait a bit longer before your child returns to school. We support that decision.

For the vast majority of families, the balance of risk favours return to school.

For more information about COVID-19 vaccines for children and youth, visit [Caring for Kids](#), the Canadian Paediatric Society's website for parents and caregivers.

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