



Chaffee County Public Health

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The emergence of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 has changed the course of the pandemic significantly. Strategies that worked for Delta don't make sense for Omicron. In a COVID landscape that seems to change by the hour, it is challenging to communicate the many changes effectively to the groups of people who need to know. We would like to offer this FAQ to school staff to answer questions and ease some anxieties about new protocols.

Does COVID-19 testing work with Omicron?

Yes and no. The PCR test remains the gold standard test to detect COVID, and this is true with Omicron. Most PCR tests are sent into laboratories, and with significant turn around delays many folks find out they have COVID well after their isolation period is over. Rapid PCR tests are available but on a limited basis and with a high cost. Rapid antigen tests don't work nearly as well on Omicron as they did on Delta. The Binax-NOW rapid test, the one typically used in schools and workplaces, doesn't typically pick up a COVID infection until 48 hours after symptoms start, if at all. There are newer rapid tests coming out that work better on Omicron, and Chaffee County is gathering these as they become available.

So if testing doesn't really work, then why do it?

We anticipate that over the next month, significant changes to testing guidance will come from the state or national level, OR more accurate rapid testing will become available. In the meantime, we are left with a very imperfect system for trying to detect COVID. At this time, we still are trying very hard to identify and isolate positive cases, students or staff. This is happening through testing symptomatic individuals, or in some cases groups of individuals who have a significant close contact - such as a sports team.

As we move toward "learning to live with COVID", it is possible that testing everyone with minor symptoms eventually won't make sense. For diseases like the flu, most people only seek out a diagnostic influenza test if they need medical care from their doctor. The rest of us stay home if we are too sick to work, and without knowing what disease we had. Another scenario is that accurate rapid tests become widely available, and everyone has a stack of them at home, testing whenever they get symptoms. Of the two scenarios above, we don't know which one will be our future. For now we will do our best to test and isolate positive cases but with the understanding that doing this perfectly is impossible.

Should I come to work if I am sick?

In general, no! If you are sick enough that you don't feel able to do your job then of course you should stay home. If your symptoms are significant, or worsening, you should stay home. The question is, what if you have a very minor runny nose, or scratchy throat, and you're not sure if it's COVID or allergies or the dry air? If you have had significant close contact with a positive case, even minor symptoms could be COVID and you could consider yourself a probable positive and stay home for five days. Significant contact means sharing a house with a positive



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case, spending significant time with a positive case, etc. Always talk with your school nurse, but in general if you haven't been in significant contact with a positive case and you feel well and can perform your job as normal, even with a runny nose, you can continue at work. Your nurse might have you test right away, or they might have you wait a few days. Wear a mask and wash your hands. If three days later you do test positive for COVID, that's ok! Omicron is defying all of our old strategies, and this scenario is happening in schools across the country. We rarely see transmission from a masked teacher to any student.

Is everyone just going to get Omicron?

Probably close to everyone. It is estimated that by mid to late February Colorado will reach herd immunity to Omicron, and that 80% of Coloradans will have had the disease. For many of us, after two years of trying to avoid COVID, that probably sounds really scary. But those who are vaccinated and boosted are at very low risk of severe outcomes. Now that's not to say that an Omicron infection is pleasant - in fact it might be miserable. And for some, especially the unvaccinated, omicron may still result in severe disease or death.

Omicron has been shown across the world to cause significantly less hospitalizations and deaths, especially for those who are vaccinated and boosted. Even in Chaffee County, where January 2022 had the highest recorded infections at 865 known cases (that's double our worst month of Delta, and probably represents only a fraction of true cases), our local hospital recorded its lowest number of hospitalizations since August 2021. Getting COVID is absolutely not a 0 risk situation, and we want to make sure we recognize and are respectful to those who will suffer a more serious illness. But we also must recognize that those of us who are most protected - the vaccinated and boosted - are quite safe! In fact, the newest data suggests that for vaccinated and boosted adults, Omicron poses less of a threat than a normal flu season. The same is true for vaccinated and unvaccinated kids.

Will Omicron be the last variant?

There is so much about the future of COVID that we don't know. It is probable that COVID will circulate in some capacity for the rest of our lives. COVID may eventually feel like a common cold. It may circulate seasonally and be dangerous for some, and less so for others, similar to how it is now. Unfortunately, there is also the possibility that a variant comes along that is more transmissible and much more dangerous.

Whatever is coming our way in the future, we are headed there in a vastly different place than we were in March 2020. We have vaccinations, very promising treatments, and after this omicron surge, quite a lot of immunity from natural infection. Most people's immune systems will have dealt with a COVID-19 virus in some way - through vaccination, infection or both.

Whatever the future brings, for now we have the opportunity to move forward into a place where we are living with the Omicron variant with less anxiety. If you've been vaccinated and boosted,



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good for you! Do all the normal things you would do during a winter season of respiratory illnesses - stay home when you're unwell, wash your hands, cover your coughs, wear a mask when in crowds while transmission is high and don't socialize with people when you're sick. And if you are truly at higher risk, you will probably need to be more diligent about these measures - while also recognizing that participating in activities that support your mental and physical wellbeing is also important.