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TO:	Health Alert Network
FROM:	Rachel Levine, MD, Secretary of Health
SUBJECT:	UPDATE: Return to Work for Healthcare Personnel with Confirmed or Suspected COVID-19
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This transmission is a “Health Update”, provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.

HOSPITALS: PLEASE SHARE WITH ALL MEDICAL, PEDIATRIC, NURSING AND LABORATORY STAFF IN YOUR HOSPITAL; **EMS COUNCILS:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE; **FQHCs:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE **LOCAL HEALTH JURISDICTIONS:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE; **PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE TO YOUR MEMBERSHIP; **LONG-TERM CARE FACILITIES:** PLEASE SHARE WITH ALL MEDICAL, INFECTION CONTROL, AND NURSING STAFF IN YOUR FACILITY

Updates were made to the CDC guidance for Return-to-Work Criteria for healthcare personnel (HCP) on April 30, 2020. These changes include:

- Changed the name of the ‘non-test-based strategy’ to the ‘symptom-based strategy’ for those with symptoms
- Changed the name to a ‘time-based strategy’ for those without symptoms
- Updated non-test-based strategies to extend the duration of exclusion from work to at least 10 days since symptoms first appeared.
- Based on this extension of the symptom-based and time-based strategies, language about the test-based strategy being preferred was removed.

The Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) is releasing the following guidance for making decisions about return to work for healthcare personnel (HCP) with confirmed COVID-19, or who have suspected COVID-19 (e.g., developed symptoms of a respiratory infection [e.g., cough, sore throat, shortness of breath, fever] but did not get tested for COVID-19). These updates are consistent with those published by the CDC on April 30, 2020 and available for review at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/return-to-work.html>. If you have questions about this guidance, please contact DOH at **1-877-PA-HEALTH (1-877-724-3258)** or your local health department.

Decisions about return to work for HCP with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 should be made in the context of local circumstances. Options include a symptom-based strategy, a test-based strategy or a time-based strategy for persons who did not develop symptoms.

Return to Work Criteria for HCP with Confirmed or Suspected COVID-19

Symptomatic HCP with suspected or confirmed COVID-19:

- *Symptom-based strategy.* Exclude from work until:
 - At least 3 days (72 hours) have passed *since recovery* defined as resolution of fever without the use of fever-reducing medications **and** improvement in respiratory symptoms (e.g., cough, shortness of breath); **and**,
 - At least 10 days have passed *since symptoms first appeared*
- *Test-based strategy.* Exclude from work until:
 - Resolution of fever without the use of fever-reducing medications **and**
 - Improvement in respiratory symptoms (e.g., cough, shortness of breath), **and**
 - Negative results of an FDA Emergency Use Authorized COVID-19 molecular assay for detection of SARS-CoV-2 RNA from at least two consecutive nasopharyngeal swab specimens collected ≥ 24 hours apart (total of two negative specimens). See [Interim Guidelines for Collecting, Handling, and Testing Clinical Specimens for 2019 Novel Coronavirus \(2019-nCoV\)](#). Of note, there have been reports of prolonged detection of RNA without direct correlation to viral culture.
 - All test results should be final before isolation is ended. Testing guidance is based upon limited information and is subject to change as more information becomes available. In persons with a persistent productive cough, SARS-CoV-2-RNA might be detected for longer periods in sputum specimens than in upper respiratory tract (nasopharyngeal swab) specimens.

HCP with laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 who have not had any symptoms:

- *Time-based strategy.* Exclude from work until:
 - 10 days have passed since the date of their first positive COVID-19 diagnostic test assuming they have not subsequently developed symptoms since their positive test.
 - If they develop symptoms, then the *symptom-based* or *test-based strategy* should be used. Note, because symptoms cannot be used to gauge where these individuals are in the course of their illness, it is possible that the duration of viral shedding could be longer or shorter than 10 days after their first positive test.
- *Test-based strategy.* Exclude from work until:
 - Negative results of an FDA Emergency Use Authorized COVID-19 molecular assay for detection of SARS-CoV-2 RNA from at least two consecutive nasopharyngeal swab specimens collected ≥ 24 hours apart (total of two negative specimens).
 - Note, because of the absence of symptoms, it is not possible to gauge where these individuals are in the course of their illness. There have been reports of prolonged detection of RNA without direct correlation to viral culture.

Note that detecting viral RNA via PCR does not necessarily mean that infectious virus is present.

If HCP had COVID-19 ruled out and have an alternate diagnosis (e.g., tested positive for influenza), criteria for return to work should be based on that diagnosis.

Return to Work Practices and Work Restrictions

After returning to work, HCP should:

- Wear a facemask for source control at all times while in the healthcare facility in accordance with [PA-HAN-497](#).
 - A facemask for source control does not replace the need to wear an N95 or higher-level respirator (or other recommended PPE) when indicated, including when caring for patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19.
 - Of note, N95 or other respirators with an exhaust valve might not provide source control.
- Be restricted from contact with severely immunocompromised patients (e.g., transplant, hematology-oncology) until 14 days after illness onset
- Self-monitor for symptoms, and seek re-evaluation from occupational health if respiratory symptoms recur or worsen
- Ensure that recovered HCW wear all indicated PPE according to facility policy. The immunity of recovered persons to COVID-19 infection is not known, and a lack of proper PPE could expose HCP to other communicable diseases.

Strategies to Mitigate Healthcare Personnel Staffing Shortages

Maintaining appropriate staffing in healthcare facilities is essential to providing a safe work environment for healthcare personnel (HCP) and safe patient care. As the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, staffing shortages occur due to HCP exposures, illness, and need to care for family members at home. Healthcare facilities must be prepared for potential staffing shortages and have plans and processes in place to mitigate them, including considerations for permitting HCP to return to work without meeting all return to work criteria above.

If there are no longer enough staff to provide safe patient care, and other contingency capacity strategies have been exhausted (see [CDC strategies](#)), healthcare facilities and employers may need to implement crisis capacity strategies to continue to provide patient care. The decision to follow contingency or crisis standards belongs to the healthcare facility, but these decisions and actions must be detailed in and consistent with their emergency preparedness plan.

Under **crisis capacity strategies**, HCP who have recovered from COVID-19, and are well enough to work, are permitted to return to work before meeting above criteria. Such HCP should be restricted from contact with severely immunocompromised patients (e.g., transplant, hematology-oncology) and facilities should consider prioritizing their duties in the following order:

1. If not already done, allow HCP with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 to perform job duties where they do not interact with others (e.g., patients or other HCP), such as in telemedicine services.
2. Allow HCP with confirmed COVID-19 to provide direct care only for patients with confirmed COVID-19, preferably in a cohort setting.
3. Allow HCP with confirmed COVID-19 to provide direct care for patients with suspected COVID-19.
4. As a last resort, allow HCP with confirmed COVID-19 to provide direct care for patients *without* suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

If HCP are permitted to return to work before meeting all return to work criteria, they should still adhere to all Return to Work Practices and Work Restrictions recommendations described above. Feeling well enough to work is a decision that can only be made by the healthcare worker, understanding that their regular duties are likely to be physically demanding. If agreeable to all parties, consider shortened shifts or extra breaks for HCP who feel well enough to work, but have not fully recovered from illness.

Refer to the [Strategies to Mitigate Healthcare Personnel Staffing Shortages](#) document for more information.

Definitions

Cloth face covering: Textile (cloth) covers are intended to keep the person wearing one from spreading respiratory secretions when talking, sneezing, or coughing. **They are not PPE and it is uncertain whether cloth face coverings protect the wearer.** CDC has guidance available on [design, use, and maintenance of cloth face coverings](#).

Facemask: Facemasks are PPE and are often referred to as surgical masks or procedure masks. Use facemasks according to product labeling and local, state, and federal requirements. FDA-cleared surgical masks are designed to protect against splashes and sprays and are prioritized for use when such exposures are anticipated, including surgical procedures. Facemasks that are not regulated by FDA, such as some procedure masks, which are typically used for isolation purposes, may not provide protection against splashes and sprays.

Respirator: A respirator is a personal protective device that is worn on the face, covers at least the nose and mouth, and is used to reduce the wearer's risk of inhaling hazardous airborne particles (including dust particles and infectious agents), gases, or vapors. Respirators are certified by the CDC/NIOSH, including those intended for use in healthcare.

Categories of Health Alert messages:

Health Alert: conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.

Health Advisory: provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

Health Update: provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.

This information is current as of May 1, 2020 but may be modified in the future. We will continue to post updated information regarding the most common questions about this subject.