

Directorate: Adults and Health

Team: Public Health

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Date: 10th December 2021

UPDATE ON NEW VARIANT, FACE COVERINGS AND TESTING REMINDER

Dear Parents and Carers,

The past few months have been challenging, and we want to thank you for your continuing efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 in our community.

We have seen a high number of cases of COVID-19 across the borough, especially since schools returned in September. In addition to this, a new variant has been identified and named 'Omicron'. There is now evidence that there is community transmission of this variant and it is another reason to ensure that we are all doing what we can to protect ourselves and our community from infection. We therefore want to update you on new government guidelines regarding mask wearing, remind you of the importance of routine testing among students and reiterate which test is appropriate to use in different situations.

Omicron guidance

As per the latest governmental guidance, all individuals who have been identified as a close contact of a suspected or confirmed case of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, will be contacted directly by NHS test and trace and required to self-isolate immediately irrespective of vaccination status and age, and asked to book a PCR test. They will be informed by the local health protection team or NHS Test and Trace if they fall into this category and provided details about self-isolation.

Face coverings in communal areas

In light of the identification of the new variant, face coverings should be worn in communal areas in all settings by staff, visitors and pupils or students in year 7 and above, unless they are exempt. Pupils or students (in year 7 or above) should continue to wear face coverings on public and dedicated school transport unless they are exempt.

Winter Events

We have written to schools in the borough to advise them on precautions to take when holding winter events. These may be held outdoors or online, or indoors if a series of infection control measures are applied.

The importance of regular testing

- New evidence suggests that using lateral flow tests routinely is a very powerful tool in stopping the spread of the virus and that the tests are very good at detecting people most likely to spread COVID-19.
- Around 1 in 3 people with COVID-19 do not have symptoms and so regular testing helps to identify positive cases.
- Most people catch COVID-19 from those they spend most time with. That could be someone in your family, a friend, or a workmate and you could pass it onto them.

- You are at higher risk of catching or passing on COVID-19 in crowded and enclosed spaces, where there are more people who might be infectious and where there is limited fresh air.
- Although vaccination reduces the risk of severe infection, evidence suggests that those who are vaccinated can still transmit the virus.

When should I use a lateral flow test?

Secondary students - lateral flow tests should be used twice a week by secondary school students to limit the spread of the virus within the school.

Everyone – the government now recommends testing if you are going to visit a person at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19, or if you know you are going to be in a crowded or enclosed space.

Lateral flow tests should only be used for asymptomatic testing and are advised for both vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals. Lateral flow tests should **not** be used instead of a PCR test if you have symptoms of COVID-19, however mild they may be. If you have symptoms, a negative lateral flow test does not rule out infection with COVID-19 and a PCR should therefore be arranged.

When should I use a PCR test?

PCR tests are very sensitive. Individuals should only have a PCR test if they:

- are symptomatic of COVID-19;
- received a positive lateral flow test;
- are identified as a close contact of a confirmed case.

What should I do if someone in my household tests positive for COVID-19?

If there is a case of COVID-19 within your household, we recommend that you take the following actions:

- Arrange for a PCR test
- Anyone with symptoms:
 - Anyone who is displaying symptoms of COVID-19 should self-isolate at home and wait for the result of their PCR test
- Anyone without symptoms:
 - Anyone under the age of 18 years and six months who does not have symptoms of COVID-19 can continue to attend school as they are exempt from self-isolation
 - Secondary students attending school should take a lateral flow test every day for 7 days from the date that the first case in your household became symptomatic
 - if your child becomes symptomatic during this time, keep them at home and arrange for a PCR test (regardless of them having taken one previously)
- Over 18 years and six months and not vaccinated:
 - Anyone over the age of 18 years and six months must self-isolate for 10 days if they are not double vaccinated

If there is an outbreak within the school, we may also advise that household contacts of COVID cases remain at home while they await the results of their PCR test, and then, if negative, take a lateral flow test each day on their return to school until seven days has passed since the first case in their household developed symptoms. This would be alongside other enhanced COVID control measures.

What should I do if my child is identified as a close contact of a positive case?

If your child is identified as a close contact to a positive case, we recommend you arrange for them to have a PCR test and also take a lateral flow test for 7 days while continuing to attend school. The lateral flow test is only appropriate if they are showing no symptoms of COVID-19. If they start to develop symptoms of COVID-19 then they must self-isolate and arrange for a further PCR test.

What should I do if my child has a positive lateral flow test but a negative PCR test?

In this case, we recommend the following:

- If someone has a positive lateral flow test followed by a negative PCR, they should still isolate for 10 days from the date of onset of symptoms/date the positive test was taken if:
 - o They have any symptoms of COVID-19, however mild;
 - o They are a close contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case;
 - o They share a household with a confirmed COVID-19 case.

If they continue to get positive lateral flow tests they should continue to isolate and get a second PCR test. Isolation begins on the day that the symptoms began or the day the first positive test was taken, if the person is asymptomatic.

Where can I get tests/get tested?

You can arrange a free PCR test for your child [here](#). Lateral flow tests can be obtained via your child's school or at any local pharmacy. A full list of where to collect testing kits is available here: <https://maps.test-and-trace.nhs.uk/>.

Yours sincerely,



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