

**Interim Guidance
for**

**COVID-19
PREVENTION AND
CONTROL IN
SCHOOLS**

March 2020
UNICEF, WHO, IFRC



GUIDANCE FOR COVID-19 PREVENTION AND CONTROL IN SCHOOLS

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Cover: Six- to eight-year-olds practicing their handwashing routines at school.

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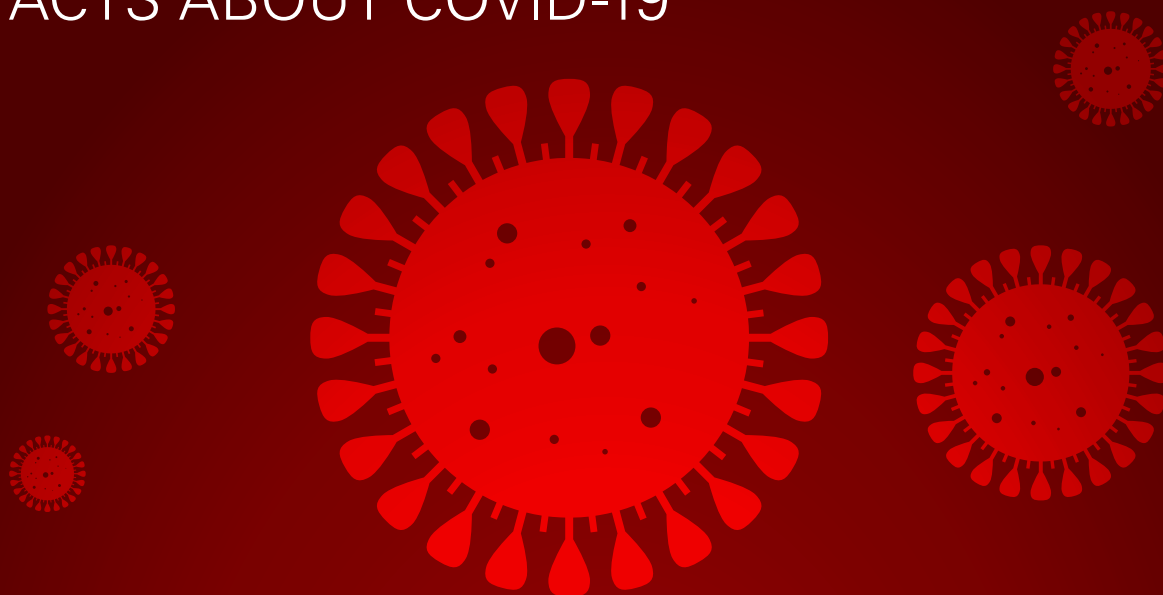
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I. FACTS ABOUT COVID-19



What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus. 'CO' stands for corona, 'VI' for virus, and 'D' for disease. Formerly, this disease was referred to as '2019 novel coronavirus' or '2019-nCoV.'

The COVID-19 virus is a new virus linked to the same family of viruses as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and some types of common cold.

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

Symptoms can include fever, cough and shortness of breath. In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia or breathing difficulties. More rarely, the disease can be fatal. These symptoms are similar to the flu (influenza) or the common cold, which are a lot more common than COVID-19. This is why testing is required to confirm if someone has COVID-19.

How does COVID-19 spread?

The virus is transmitted through direct contact with respiratory droplets of an infected person (generated through coughing and sneezing). Individuals can also be infected from and touching surfaces contaminated with the virus and touching their face (e.g., eyes, nose, mouth). There is currently no evidence to support transmission of COVID-19 associated with food. The COVID-19 virus may survive on surfaces for several hours, but simple disinfectants can kill it.

Who is most at risk?

We are learning more about how COVID-19 affects people every day. Older people, and people with chronic medical conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease, appear to

be more at risk of developing severe symptoms. As this is a new virus, we are still learning about how it affects children and other vulnerable groups. We know it is possible for people of any age to be infected with the virus, but so far there are relatively few cases of COVID-19 reported among children. This is a new virus and we need to learn more about how it affects children. The virus can be fatal in rare cases, so far mainly among older people with pre-existing medical conditions.

What is the treatment for COVID-19?

There is no currently available vaccine for COVID-19. However, many of the symptoms can be treated and getting early care from a healthcare provider can make the disease less dangerous. There are several clinical trials that are being conducted to evaluate potential therapeutics for COVID-19.

How can the spread of COVID-19 be slowed down or prevented?

As with other respiratory infections like the flu or the common cold, public health measures are critical to slow the spread of illnesses. Public health measures are everyday preventive actions that include:

- ✓ staying home when sick;
- ✓ covering mouth and nose with flexed elbow or tissue when coughing or sneezing. Dispose of used tissue immediately;
- ✓ washing hands often with soap and water; and
- ✓ cleaning frequently touched surfaces and objects.

As we learn more about COVID-19 public health officials may recommend additional actions.

II. INTRODUCTION



The World Health Organization (WHO) has made the assessment that COVID-19 (coronavirus) can be characterised as a pandemic and the virus has now spread to many countries and territories. While a lot is still unknown about the virus that causes COVID-19, we do know that it is transmitted through direct contact with respiratory droplets of an infected person (generated through coughing and sneezing) Individuals can also be infected from touching surfaces contaminated with the virus and touching their face (e.g., eyes, nose, mouth). There is currently no evidence to support transmission of COVID-19 associated with food. The COVID-19 virus may survive on surfaces for several hours, but simple disinfectants can kill it. While COVID-19 continues to spread it is important that communities take action to prevent further transmission, reduce the impacts of the outbreak and support control measures.

The protection of children and educational facilities is particularly important. Precautions are necessary to prevent the potential spread of COVID-19 in school settings; however, care must also be taken to avoid stigmatizing students and staff who may have been exposed to the virus. It is important to remember that COVID-19 does not differentiate between borders, ethnicities, disability status, age or gender. Education settings should continue to be welcoming, respectful, inclusive, and supportive environments to all. Measures taken by schools can prevent the entry and spread of COVID-19 by students and staff who may have been exposed to the virus, while minimizing disruption and protecting students and staff from discrimination.

Purpose

Today, children and young people are global citizens, powerful agents of change and the next generation of caregivers, scientists, and doctors. Any crisis presents the opportunity to help them learn, cultivate compassion and increase resilience while building a safer and more caring community. Having information and facts about COVID-19 will help diminish students' fears and anxieties around the disease and support their ability to cope with any secondary impacts in their lives. This guidance provides key messages and considerations for engaging school administrators, teachers and staff, food handlers, parents, caregivers and community members, as well as children themselves in promoting safe and healthy schools.

The purpose of this document is to provide clear and actionable guidance for safe operations through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in schools and other educational facilities. The guidance, while specific to countries that have already confirmed the transmission of COVID-19, is still relevant in all other contexts. Education can encourage students to become advocates for disease prevention and control at home, in school, and in their community by talking to others about how to prevent the spread of viruses. Maintaining safe school operations or reopening schools after a closure requires many considerations but, if done well, can promote public health.

III. SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS AND STAFF

Key Messages & Actions

Basic principles

Following basic principles can help keep students, teachers, and other staff (custodial, food handlers, etc.) safe at school and help stop the spread of this disease.

Recommendations for healthy schools are:

- Sick students, teachers and other staff should not come to school
- Schools should enforce regular hand washing with safe water and soap, alcohol rub/hand sanitizer or chlorine solution and, at a minimum, daily disinfection and cleaning of school surfaces
- Schools should provide water, sanitation and waste management facilities and follow environmental cleaning and decontamination procedures
- Schools should promote social distancing (a term applied to certain actions that are taken to slow down the spread of a highly contagious disease, including limiting large groups of people coming together)

Know the latest facts

Understand basic information about coronavirus disease (COVID-19), including its symptoms, complications, how it is transmitted and how to prevent transmission. Stay informed about COVID-19 through reputable sources such as UNICEF, IFRC, WHO and national health ministry advisories. Be aware of fake information/myths that may circulate by word-of-mouth or online.

Ensure safe school operations

See 'Checklist on Safe School Environments' below. Update or develop school emergency and contingency plans. Work with officials to guarantee schools are not used as shelters, treatment units, etc. Consider cancelling any community events/meetings that usually take place on school premises, based on risk.

Reinforce frequent handwashing and sanitation and procure needed supplies. Prepare and maintain handwashing stations with soap and water, and if possible, place alcohol-based hand rub (hand sanitizers) in each classroom, at entrances and exits, and near lunchrooms and toilets.

Clean and disinfect school buildings, classrooms, kitchens and dining facilities, and especially water and sanitation facilities at least once a day, particularly surfaces that are touched by many people (railings, lunch tables, sports

equipment, door and window handles, toys, teaching and learning aids etc.)

Implement social distancing practices that may include:

- Staggering the beginning and end of the school day
- Cancelling assemblies, sports games and other events that create crowded conditions
- When possible, create space for children's desks to be at least one metre apart
- Teach and model creating space and avoiding unnecessary touching

Establish procedures if students or staff become unwell

Plan ahead with local health authorities, school health staff and update emergency contact lists. Ensure a procedure for separating sick students and staff from those who are well – without creating stigma – and a process for informing parents/caregivers, and consulting with health care providers/health authorities wherever possible. Students/staff may need to be referred directly to a health facility, depending on the situation/context, or sent home. Share procedures with staff, parents and students ahead of time.

Promote information sharing

Coordinate and follow guidelines from the national health and education authorities. Share known information with staff, caregivers and students, providing updated information on the disease situation, including prevention and control efforts at school. Reinforce that caregivers should alert the school and health care authorities if someone in their home has been diagnosed with COVID-19 and keep their child at home. Utilize parent-teacher committees and other mechanisms to promote information sharing. Also be sure to address children's questions and concerns, including through the development of child-friendly materials such as posters which can be placed on notice boards, in restrooms, and other central locations.

Adapt school policies where appropriate

Develop flexible attendance and sick leave policies that encourage students and staff to stay home when sick or when caring for sick family members. Discourage the use of perfect attendance awards and incentives. Identify critical job functions and positions, and plan for alternative coverage by cross-training staff. Plan for possible academic calendar changes, particularly in relation to breaks and exams.

Monitor school attendance

Implement school absenteeism monitoring systems to track student and staff absence and compare against usual absenteeism patterns at the school. Alert local health authorities about large increases in student and staff absenteeism due to respiratory illnesses.

Plan for continuity of learning

In the case of absenteeism/sick leave or temporary school closures, support continued access to quality education. This can include:

- Use of online/e-learning strategies
- Assigning reading and exercises for home study
- Radio, podcast or television broadcasts of academic content
- Assigning teachers to conduct remote daily or weekly follow up with students
- Review/develop accelerated education strategies

Implement targeted health education

Integrate disease prevention and control in daily activities and lessons. Ensure content is age-, gender-, ethnicity-, and disability-responsive and activities are built into existing subjects. (See Section on Age-Appropriate Health Education).

Address Mental Health/Psychosocial support needs

Encourage children to discuss their questions and concerns. Explain it is normal that they may experience different reactions and encourage them to talk to teachers if they have any questions or concerns. Provide information in an honest, age-appropriate manner. Guide students on how to support their peers and prevent exclusion and bullying. Ensure teachers are aware of local resources for their own well-being. Work with school health workers/social workers to identify and support students and staff who exhibit signs of distress.

Support vulnerable populations

Work with social service systems to ensure continuity of critical services that may take place in schools such as health screenings, feeding programs or therapies for children with special needs. Consider the specific needs of children with disabilities, and how marginalized populations may be more acutely impacted by the illness or its secondary effects. Examine any specific implications for girls that may increase their risk, such as responsibility for taking care of the sick at home, or exploitation when out of school. Systems that protect children, including family and community structures, may break down in areas of infection, even when school remains open. Specific measures should be implemented to protect girls and boys from the risk of sexual abuse and exploitation at home, school and in the community, with the changing dynamics of risk imposed by COVID-19.

CHECKLIST FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS AND STAFF

1. Work with local authorities and health officials to ensure educational facilities are not used as health treatment or quarantine centers, as shelters or for any other non-educational purposes, even on a temporary basis

2. Promote and demonstrate regular hand washing and positive hygiene behaviors and monitor their uptake. Ensure adequate, clean and separate toilets for girls and boys

- Ensure soap and safe water is available at age-appropriate hand washing stations

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