From the Chief Medical Officer's Office

Department of Health
An Roinn Sláinte
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Dear Parent/Carer

As parents and carers I appreciate that some of you will be worried and possibly anxious about the reopening of schools. Let me reassure you this concern is natural and wholly expected given the last number of months. It has most certainly been a challenging year for everyone so far.

Now that schools have returned I am writing to provide you with some advice if a child or young person in your care develops symptoms of a common cold or other similar infections during the current pandemic.

The decision to reopen schools was not taken lightly. We considered the scientific and medical evidence alongside the negative impact that closure was having on the health and wellbeing of our children. The broad evidence indicates that child-to-child and child-to-adult transmission of COVID-19 in the classroom is not common.

However we must all be aware that COVID-19 is still active in our communities. It has not gone away and parents, pupils and indeed wider society need to stay vigilant and not become complacent. Everyone has a role to play in ensuring that hygiene, social distancing and all other public health measures continue to be followed.

In order to ensure children and young people do not miss out on their education, it is important to be clear about how COVID-19 symptoms differ from those of other infections that we usually see circulating at this time of the year.

All of us – including parents and the wider school community – must remain vigilant for the symptoms of COVID-19, and understand what actions are required should someone develop symptoms either at home or in the school setting. If your child or anyone in your household develops any of the following symptoms of COVID-19 they should stay home and arrange to get tested as soon as possible –

- A new, continuous cough – this means coughing a lot for more than an hour, or 3 or more coughing episodes in 24 hours (if you usually have a cough, it may be worse than usual) ; <u>or</u>

- A high temperature/fever – this means you feel hot to touch on your chest or back (you do not need to measure your temperature); or

- A loss of or change in sense of smell or taste.

Details on how to book a test can be found here.

I would emphasise that if an individual does not have any of the stated symptoms, they do not require a test. Schools should not ask pupils to book a COVID-19 test unless they have one or more of the symptoms above. We are currently experiencing significant demand on our testing programme, it is important that testing is reserved for people who have symptoms of COVID-19 and people who have been advised by our contact tracing or other health services to get tested.

I recognise that at this time of year, it is common for colds and similar viral infections to circulate. In many cases, children will be well enough to attend school and continue their learning with little or no interruption to their education. In other cases where they may have a heavy cold they may need to take time off to recover. There is no need to contact your General Practitioner or attend other health services unless you are concerned about you child or would normally to do for other health reasons.

But they do not need tested for Covid-19 and do not need to self-isolate.

There have been reports recently that 'tummy bugs' may be a symptom of COVID-19 in children and young people. Whilst recent research provides useful early findings, there needs to be a wider discussion at a UK wide level about this. You therefore do not currently need to get your child tested.

That said, where a pupil displays gastrointestinal symptoms, such as vomiting or diarrhoea, they should not attend school until after their symptoms have resolved for at least 2 days (this means they should not have been sick or had diarrhoea for at least 2 days before they return to school). In these instances the pupil and their family should follow the school's usual attendance policy in respect of these symptoms.

The Department of Education has produced a leaflet, which is enclosed, advising what you should do if your child or anyone you live with has any symptoms of COVID-19.

We can expect that there will be cases of COVID-19 among children and young people in the weeks ahead. When this happens, our teams in the Public Health Agency (PHA) will respond and will work closely with the school involved to ensure that all necessary measures are taken to protect your child, other children and school staff.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all. Parents and carers across Northern Ireland have made monumental efforts to keep themselves, their families and the wider community safe over the past few months – and I thank you all for your ongoing vigilance in this regard. I have no doubt that with your continued support we can help ensure that school is a safe place for all our children and young people to continue their education.

Together we can fight this virus. Together we can ensure the risk of COVID-19 is minimised and we can continue to support our children's education and wellbeing.

Yours sincerely

DR MICHAEL McBRIDE
Chief Medical Officer