

**Guidance for Institutions of Higher Education and Local Health Districts  
Considerations for Students and Staff who are Returning Home for Holidays or Extended Breaks  
November 6, 2020**

**Background**

Students and staff attending institutions of higher education (IHEs) (e.g., colleges, universities) may be planning to return home to spend time with their families during holidays or extended breaks. This guidance provides local health districts and IHE administrators with considerations for how IHE students and staff can return home safely and protect family members who may be at increased risk for severe COVID-19.

**Considerations about the Risk of COVID-19**

- COVID-19 spreads from person to person and transmission can occur even if the infected person does not have symptoms or before symptoms develop.
- Students and staff of IHEs may be at risk of exposure to COVID-19 in a number of ways and therefore may pose greater risk of spreading it to family members and others at home.
  - Some IHEs might be experiencing a COVID-19 outbreak or have higher levels of spread of COVID-19 than areas where students' families live.
  - To get home, students and staff might be exposed during short- or long-distance travel.
  - While home, students and staff may want to socialize with friends from other areas or IHEs and other family members during holiday gatherings.
- The student/staff member or family members may be at [increased risk of severe COVID-19](#). These include older adults, people of any age with an underlying medical condition, such as chronic kidney disease, heart disease, diabetes, and obesity.
- Although IHE students are typically younger adults who are generally considered to have lower risk of developing severe COVID-19, severe disease can occur in people of any age.

**Minimize Exposure Risk Before Leaving the IHE**

Students and staff should minimize their interactions with others as much as possible in the 14 days before leaving the IHE. Students and staff should also minimize the risk of exposure during travel home. Traveling alone in a private vehicle is the safest option. Students and staff who are unable to limit interactions with others at the IHE may consider quarantining themselves for 14 days after they arrive home.

**COVID-19 Testing**

**VDH continues to recommend [COVID-19 testing](#) for any individual with signs/symptoms of COVID-19 or individuals with known close contact to a person with COVID-19.**

IHE students and staff returning home may consider getting tested before leaving the IHE. This is particularly important for students and staff who attend IHEs with ongoing outbreaks, or if the IHE is located in a community with [increased community transmission](#). An alternate strategy for students staying home for a longer period is to be tested about one week after travel.

There are certain caveats to consider regarding testing:

- RT-PCR is the preferred test to diagnose COVID-19 infections, but antigen tests may also be considered. For more information on antigen testing see [here](#).

### COVID-19 Testing (continued)

- False positive or false negative test results are possible with any test, particularly if the person being tested has a low likelihood of having COVID-19 (e.g., does not have symptoms or has not had close contact to a person with COVID-19).
- Individuals should limit interactions and avoid travel while awaiting COVID-19 test results.
- Individuals who test positive for COVID-19 should self-isolate for 10 days. This might mean staying on campus longer than planned.
- Individuals who test negative for COVID-19 and have not had known contact with someone with COVID-19 should continue to follow the core COVID-19 prevention steps (listed below). Exposure and infection could still occur after the negative result and before arriving at home.
- Individuals who had close contact with someone with COVID-19 and test negative must still quarantine for 14 days after last exposure. If travel would involve public transportation, this might mean staying on campus longer than planned.

### Travel

- Students/staff travel home by multiple means, including personal vehicle or commercial/public transportation by airplane, bus, or rideshare.
- Students/staff should **not** use commercial/public transportation if they are in isolation or quarantine.
- Exposures can happen during travel and would negate a pre-travel negative test for COVID-19.
- To minimize the risk of exposure, students/staff should always (during travel, while at home, before getting tested, while waiting for test results, after getting test results) follow the core prevention steps (e.g., physical distancing, mask, handwashing) and the VDH recommendations for travelers [here](#).

### Activities While at Home

These activities are especially important if the student/staff member does not limit interactions with others or get tested before travel or if the student/staff member is engaging in risky behaviors (large gatherings, not distancing, not wearing a mask) while home:

- If possible, use a separate bedroom and bathroom for the first two weeks.
- Limit the size, frequency, and duration of social interactions. In general, crowds should be avoided and smaller groups are safer than larger groups; fewer interactions are safer than many interactions; and shorter gatherings are safer than longer interactions. Other factors should also be considered, such as the location of the gathering (outdoor gatherings are generally safer than indoor gatherings) and the behavior of people at the gathering. For more information, see [here](#).
- Be particularly conscientious about following the core COVID-19 prevention steps when around persons who are older, have underlying health conditions, or are otherwise vulnerable to severe illness with COVID-19.
- Everyone (students/staff and family members) should get tested and monitor their health for COVID-19 symptoms for 14 days after being potentially exposed to COVID-19.
- Anyone who develops any COVID-19 symptoms, even if symptoms are very mild, should isolate from others and get tested as soon as possible.

### Core COVID-19 Prevention Steps for Everyone to ALWAYS Take, Regardless of Setting

- Everyone should maintain a safe distance between themselves and others. This means staying out of crowded places and keeping at least six feet away from others when possible. Even when staying six feet apart, everyone should limit the amount of time spent with people other than those in their household.

**Core COVID-19 Prevention Steps (continued)**

- Everyone should wear a mask (also known as a cloth face covering) in public settings whenever possible, even when distancing.
- Everyone should [wash their hands](#) frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol can be used.
- Frequently touched surfaces should be cleaned and disinfected often.
- Everyone should stay home when any of the following are met:
  - They are sick (even if symptoms are very mild)
  - They have tested positive for COVID-19 on a viral test
  - They are waiting for COVID-19 test results
  - They have had [close contact](#) with someone with COVID-19 in the past 14 days
  - Prevention of influenza (flu) is also important this time of year. The best way to prevent flu is with a [flu vaccine](#). A flu vaccine is recommended for everyone six months old and older, every year, if possible by the end of October. Because it takes the body about two weeks after getting a flu vaccine to develop protection, students are recommended to get the flu vaccine now or at least two weeks before returning home.

**Table. Summary of considerations for students/staff returning home from institutions of higher education by risk of spreading or getting COVID-19.**

	<b>Lowest Risk</b>	<b>Highest Risk</b>
Limit Interactions	Limit interactions for 14 days either before or after arriving home	Do not limit interactions with others for 14 days before or after arriving home
COVID-19 Testing	Tested for COVID-19 before returning home or shortly after arriving (about 1 week after travel)	Not tested for COVID-19 before returning home or shortly after arriving (about 1 week after travel)
Travel	Travel alone by private vehicle	Travel by public transportation
Activities while Home	Always minimize social interactions - e.g., limit the number of people interacting with and the frequency and duration of interactions	Attend large gatherings, especially if not distancing and not wearing masks
Following “Core” Prevention Steps	Always follow	Never follow

**Additional Resources**

- VDH: Social Gatherings and Public Indoor Spaces  
[www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/schools-workplaces-community-locations/social-gatherings/](http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/schools-workplaces-community-locations/social-gatherings/)
- VDH: Testing Sites  
[www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/covid-19-testing/covid-19-testing-sites/](http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/covid-19-testing/covid-19-testing-sites/)
- VDH: Travelers  
[www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/coronavirus/travel-to-areas-with-widespread-ongoing-community-spread/](http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/coronavirus/travel-to-areas-with-widespread-ongoing-community-spread/)

# Information for Students and Staff from Colleges and Universities who are Returning Home for Holidays or Extended Breaks

If you are planning to return home to spend time with your family or friends during the holidays or for an extended break, please consider taking these steps to help keep you and those around you who may be at risk for severe COVID-19 safe.

## Step 1: Minimize your risk before you leave and while traveling home

- Limit interaction with others for 14 days before departure.
- Wear a mask (also known as a cloth face covering) whenever you interact with another person, especially if you are less than six feet apart, even if you are outside.
- Consider getting tested for COVID-19 before you leave and wait until you have the results before traveling home. Ideally, this testing would be done as close to your date of departure as possible and no longer than 10-14 days before leaving your school.
- Get a flu vaccine at least 2 weeks before returning home.
- Always follow the COVID-19 core prevention steps (e.g., distancing, mask, handwashing) and the VDH recommendations for travelers [here](#) to minimize the risk of exposure during travel (whether by personal vehicle or public transportation).



## Step 2: Minimize your risk to your family and friends at home

- Consider getting tested about 1 week after returning home to help identify any exposures or illness you may have picked up while traveling.
- Wear a mask as noted above.
- Minimize interactions with others by spending short periods of time with smaller groups of people, outside if possible, and avoiding long, indoor gatherings.
- These recommendations are important all of the time, but ESPECIALLY if you will be seeing older relatives or family members with underlying medical conditions.
- Anyone (you, your family, or friends) who develops any COVID-19 symptoms, even if symptoms are very mild, should isolate from others and get tested as soon as possible. Symptoms of COVID-19 include fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, and diarrhea.



## Step 3: Check with your college or university before returning

- Many schools will have return protocols (such as quarantining and getting tested) that you should follow at the end of the holiday or break.
- Continue to monitor for any signs or symptoms of COVID-19. Isolate from others and get tested if you develop any symptoms.



IF YOU HAVE MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT COVID-19  
CONTACT 877-ASK-VDH3 (877-275-8343)  
IF YOU ARE HAVING A MEDICAL EMERGENCY CALL 911