

→ [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) | National lockdown: stay at home

→ [Brexit](#) | Check how the new rules affect you

Home > [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) > [Testing for coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
 > [Daily contact testing in schools: statement from PHE and NHS TT about next steps](#)



Guidance

Position statement regarding daily contact testing in schools from PHE and NHS Test and Trace

Published 20 January 2021

At the end of last year the government announced a widespread testing programme in schools to detect additional asymptomatic cases and reduce transmission. This included regular testing of staff and the introduction of daily contact testing for close contacts in secondary schools. This remains an extremely important part of our overarching testing programme.

Initial pilots of testing in schools (led by Public Health England (PHE) and NHS Test and Trace), including contact testing, started in October. These pilots illustrated the potential benefit of daily contact testing in schools in detecting more positive cases and ensuring continued face-to-face education. In parallel modelling work was undertaken by SPI-M, looking at the potential for the regular testing of contacts as an alternative to self-isolation. The SAGE 68 meeting concluded that: “overall SAGE is supportive of piloting regular testing to avoid quarantine and assesses that this could provide a similar effect to the current 14-day isolation system” [note that the isolation period has subsequently reduced from 14 to 10 days].

On the basis of the potential benefit of daily contact testing in pilot schools, wider pilots and modelling work, the introduction daily contact testing was supported in schools alongside weekly testing, given the high priority of provision of education in a face-to-face setting. This is part of a wider rollout of daily contact testing, as set out in the government’s [COVID-19 Winter Plan](#).

Since the announcement of the schools testing programme in December, we have seen the emergence of a new variant of the virus which has become dominant in the UK. The variant has been shown to have increased transmissibility and causes higher secondary attack rates. This increases the risk of transmission everywhere, including in school settings.

Given that VOC202012/01 has higher rates of transmission and hence generates a higher secondary attack rate – and that the pandemic has entered a new phase – the balance between the risks (transmission of virus in schools and onward to households and the wider community) and benefits (education in a face-to-face and safe setting) for daily contact testing is unclear.

In light of this changing situation, we now recommend that the rollout of daily contact testing within schools is paused, other than for schools involved in further evaluation. This will enable the further detailed evaluation of changing circumstances including, potentially, lower infection rates and modelling work required to understand the benefits of daily contact testing in the this new phase of the pandemic.

Schools should continue to test their staff regularly (twice-weekly where possible, in line with recommendations for other workforces that need to leave the home to work) and test pupils twice upon return to school, as has been the case since the start of January.

NHS Test and Trace and PHE will conduct structured evaluation of daily contact testing as part of a wider evaluation of daily contact testing in a range of private and public settings. The Department for Education will support this evaluation so that its findings can contribute to further public health advice on daily contact testing in educational settings. Schools or colleges who have found daily contact testing helpful and would like to take part in the evaluation should contact the NHS Test and Trace evaluation team: dct-pilotpmo@dhsc.gov.uk

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