



Arkansas Department of Health

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Guidelines for Evaluating and Availability of Essential Healthcare Workers to Return to Work

Objective: To provide guidance and criteria for essential healthcare workers to return to work during quarantine period for COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant morbidity and mortality to the state, in addition to many hardships for the people of Arkansas. Society is built upon having a functioning infrastructure of essential services. The pandemic has full potential to interrupt or delay these services due to the lack of essential personnel either through isolation or quarantine procedures intended to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Isolation and quarantine are essential public health actions that separate individuals who could spread the virus to others. The below guidance is intended to balance the need for quarantining of exposed individuals, isolation of symptomatic and asymptomatic infected persons, and continuation of essential services.

Each facility's unique situation cannot be addressed by a single specific guideline and, as such, local experts should be utilized to balance patient safety with healthcare worker safety in order to meet each facility's goals and mission for care delivery. Each facility is strongly encouraged to develop a committee consisting of administrative leadership, clinical experts in intensive care, nursing, infection prevention, and employee health representatives to evaluate their facility's policy on utilizing essential staff to work while either quarantined or isolated.

The following are guidelines for evaluating essential healthcare workers and their availability to return to work following exposure to COVID-19:

- Healthcare workers that test positive for COVID-19 by any diagnostic test (antigen or PCR) **must not** come to work for at least 10 days from the date of symptom-onset. If the worker remains asymptomatic, they must not come to work for 10 days from the date the test was collected.
- Any healthcare worker that is symptomatic for COVID-19 (fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, diarrhea, etc.) must stay home until they receive further guidance from their employee health program (or designee) regarding testing and isolation. Symptomatic persons should be tested as soon as possible. Testing is available in every county at the local health units.
- Healthcare workers that meet criteria for close contact without appropriate personal protective equipment to a positive case of COVID-19 in the community or the workplace shall be required to quarantine from work and community activities for 14 days from the date of last exposure.
- Healthcare workers that are quarantined **must be** tested by PCR 5-7 days after exposure unless they are will be excluded for a full 14 days from the date of last exposure.

- Persons that are quarantining may be allowed to come back to work before the end of the 14 days by the facility if the following criteria are met (note: this person is still expected to quarantine from community activities and outings regardless if a quarantine waiver is issued):
 - 1) Employee has tested negative by PCR for COVID-19 from a sample collected at least 5 days after exposure. Persons cannot work before test results are received.
 - 2) Non-direct care workers: Location where employee works offers a secluded space away from other individuals; if not, efforts should be made to find an alternate work location during the quarantine period. Employee is always masked (using a facility issued healthcare mask) when around others, regardless of distance.
 - 3) Direct care workers: Always masked with an addition of a face shield.
 - 4) Employee is monitored for symptoms, including a temperature check and symptom screening each day before starting their shift and during their shift. Should an employee develop symptoms, they will immediately leave the work environment and inform their supervisor.
 - 5) Break rooms are available so that breaks and meals are scheduled and taken when no other personnel are present.

If, due to a worsening pandemic situation, essential healthcare operations are jeopardized, as a last resort, asymptomatic healthcare workers that test positive for COVID-19 may be able to return work prior to completion of the isolation/quarantine timeframe in very limited situations. The Arkansas Department of Health discourages this practice but allows it to occur in order to maintain access to essential life-saving care. Each facility's unique situation cannot be addressed by specific guidelines and, as such, local experts should be utilized to balance patient safety with healthcare worker safety to meet each facility's goals and mission for delivery of care. Each facility is strongly encouraged to develop a committee consisting of administrative leadership, clinical experts in intensive care, nursing, infection prevention, and employee health representatives to evaluate the facility's policy on utilizing essential staff to work while either quarantined or isolated.

The below guidance builds upon the previous quarantine guidance and provides stricter limitations for COVID-19 positive staff and healthcare workers coming on-site during the 10-day isolation period:

- 1) Healthcare worker **must provide an essential clinical service** that cannot be provided by other available workers or without the employee coming physically on-site to provide care. Telemedicine and the use of alternative staffing policies should be explored first.
- 2) Healthcare worker **must be asymptomatic** of all COVID-19 symptoms.
- 3) Healthcare worker **will only work on dedicated units for COVID-19 positive patients and with only COVID-19 positive patients.**
- 4) Healthcare worker(s) that are positive will have a separate break room from other employees to prevent comingling during lunch and break times.
- 5) Healthcare worker must not have any documented occurrences of non-compliance with infection control policies.
- 6) Healthcare workers must continue to isolate from community activities when not at work until the completion of their designated isolation period.