



RETURN TO WORK GUIDANCE AFTER COVID-19 ILLNESS OR EXPOSURE TO A CONFIRMED CASE

Guidance for: Employers and managers to determine when an employee who tested positive for COVID-19 or was exposed to a positive COVID-19 case can safely return to work

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Harris County Continuity of Government (COG) is an essential function and is important to ensure that vital services are met. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides guidance for critical infrastructure workers (essential workers) and non-essential workers, which serves as a basis for Harris County Public Health's (HCPH) return to work general guidance for Harris County employees.

While these are HCPH recommendations, HCPH has discussed these protocols with members of the COG team before finalizing. In general, this guidance points to the following:

COVID-19 Test Positive

- **Employees** who tests positive for COVID-19 and is **symptomatic** may be permitted to return to work after 10 days have passed since symptom onset, and after 24 hours of being fever-free, and other symptoms have improved.
- **Employees** who tests positive for COVID-19 and remains **asymptomatic** can return to work 10 days after their first positive COVID-19 test.

Exposure (potential) to COVID-19

- **Critical infrastructure employees (essential workers)** following potential exposure may be permitted to continue to work, provided they remain **asymptomatic** and follow additional precautions.
 - o If they develop symptoms, they cannot return to work until after 10 days since symptom onset, and after 24 hours of being fever-free, and other symptoms have improved.
- **Non-essential workers** following potential exposure regardless of symptoms, should not return to work and instead quarantine for 14 days after the date of last exposure.

What is attached includes both detailed written information and a set of visual flow charts to make it easier for partner agencies to understand this guidance.

Definitions

Case: an individual with laboratory confirmed (PCR) SARS-CoV-2

Close contact: an individual who had close contact (<6 feet) for more than 15 minutes to a person who tested positive for COVID-19 (symptomatic or asymptomatic) during the infectious period (usually from the 48 hours before the individual became symptomatic until they met criteria for discontinuing home isolation)

Suspected case of COVID-19: an individual who has COVID-19 symptoms that has been in close contact to someone with COVID-19 but has not been tested, or an individual who has COVID-19 symptoms and is awaiting test results.

Critical infrastructure worker: an employee who fits into any of the CISA Guidance's critical infrastructure workforce categories, qualifies for a Critical Sector worker exemption.

Isolation: a public health strategy used to separate people infected with COVID-19 from people who are not infected.

Quarantine: a public health strategy used to keep someone who might have been exposed to COVID-19 away from others.

Infectious Period: the time when a person can spread the virus to others. For COVID-19, the infectious period begins 48 hours before symptoms appear until they meet end of isolation criteria.

Contact Tracing: involves identifying people who have an infectious disease (cases) and the people who they came in contact with (contacts) and working with them to stop disease spread. This includes asking people with COVID-19 to isolate and their contacts to quarantine at home.

Asymptomatic: showing no symptoms at all.

Symptomatic: showing symptoms. Symptoms may be mild to severe. COVID-19 symptoms can include: Fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, new loss of taste and smell, among other symptoms. If symptoms are not explained by other causes, there's a reason to suspect symptoms may indicate COVID-19 infection.

When can a COVID-19 positive employee discontinue home isolation?

What to do if an employee reports testing positive for COVID-19?

- If positive employee is at home, instruct employee to stay home.
- If the positive employee is at work, send them home immediately and follow your department's reporting process.
- If an employee tests positive for COVID-19 (using a viral test, not an antibody test), employee must be excluded from work location and remain in home isolation if they do not need to be hospitalized. If possible, employers should allow positive employees to work remotely if they are able and well enough to perform duties.

Employees who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 cannot be allowed to return to work until they have met the CDC's End of Isolation Guidance outlined below:

Symptom-based Strategy (recommended)

Symptomatic persons with confirmed COVID-19:

Who had mild/moderate illness and are not severely immunocompromised can return to work after:

- At least 10 days have passed since symptoms first appeared **and**
- At least 24 hours have passed since last fever without the use of fever-reducing medications **and**
- Other symptoms have improved

Who had severe to critical illness (ex. they were hospitalized for shortness of breath or pneumonia, respiratory failure, septic shock, etc.) can return to work after:

- At least 20 days have passed since symptoms first appeared **and**
- At least 24 hours have passed since last fever without the use of fever-reducing medications **and**
- Symptoms (e.g., cough, shortness of breath) have improved

Time-based Strategy

Asymptomatic persons with confirmed COVID-19:

Who are not severely immunocompromised (e.g. cancer, bone marrow transplant, HIV, AIDS, use of steroids or immune suppressants, etc.) can return to work after:

- At least 10 days have passed since the positive laboratory test and the person remains asymptomatic

Who are severely immunocompromised can return to work after:

- At least 20 days have passed since the positive laboratory test and the person remains asymptomatic.

Note: asymptomatic persons who test positive and later develop symptoms should follow the guidance for symptomatic persons on left side.

For persons who never develop symptoms, isolation and other precautions can be discontinued 10 days after the date of their first positive RT-PCR test, assuming they have not subsequently developed symptoms since the positive result. Available data indicate that persons with mild to moderate COVID-19 remain infectious no longer than 10 days after symptom onset.

The **Test-based Strategy** is no longer recommended to determine when to discontinue home isolation except in certain circumstances such as a person who is severely immunocompromised.

The Test-based Strategy could be used to discontinue isolation or precautions earlier than would occur using the symptom-based strategy. [CDC www.cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov)

What to do if an employee reports being a close contact to someone who was positive for COVID-19?

If an employee reports being in close contact with someone who has COVID-19 in the last 14 days, whether that be in the household, community, or in the workplace, the employee should immediately notify his or her supervisor and [quarantine](#). If possible, employers should allow employees to work remotely while in self-quarantine.

Close contact with someone who has COVID-19 includes:

- Being within 6 feet of someone who has COVID-19 for at least 15 minutes
- Someone providing care at home to someone who is sick with COVID-19
- Having had direct physical contact with the person (hugged or kissed them)
- Having shared eating or drinking utensils
- Being sneezed, coughed, or somehow getting respiratory droplets on them

Testing for COVID-19 is recommended for all individuals who are a close contact to a person who tested positive for COVID-19, regardless of whether they develop symptoms. These individuals should not return to work while awaiting test results.

For employees who may have been exposed and were in “**close contact**” to someone who is infected with COVID-19, employer should ensure the following before allowing an exposed employee to return to work:

- Exposed employees who **have** symptoms of COVID-19 should self-isolate and follow CDC “If You Are Sick” recommendations:
 - o Stay home except to get medical care
 - o Separate from others
 - o Monitor symptoms
 - o Wear a mask over nose and mouth
 - o Practice good hygiene
 - o Avoid sharing personal household items
 - o Clean and disinfect
- If an employee is **symptomatic** and waiting for COVID-19 results, they should stay home and monitor their health to protect coworkers, family, friends and others from possibly getting COVID-19.
 - o Employees who have symptoms and receive a negative result, should continue to stay away from others and continue to quarantine for 14 days after last exposure to person with COVID-19.
 - o A second test and additional medical consultation may be needed if symptoms do not improve.
 - o If symptoms worsen, employee should seek emergency medical care.
- If at any time during the quarantine/monitoring period, the employee develops symptoms, if at home, they must remain at home and not report to work. Employee should seek medical attention and/or COVID-19 testing.
- Employees exposed who **do not have** any symptoms, should remain at home and quarantine for 14 days after the date of last exposure with the positive individual. Critical employees may return to work as long as they remain asymptomatic.
 - o If employee is at work and starts feeling ill, then employee must leave facilities immediately and should seek medical attention or testing for COVID-19.

- Employees who are asymptomatic and in quarantine can seek testing 5-7 days after their exposure. Employees that choose to be tested should seek out viral testing for results to be considered diagnostic.
 - o Employees who **do not have symptoms** and receive a **negative test result**, should continue to quarantine and stay away from others.
 - o A negative test result before the end of the quarantine period does not rule out possible infection.
 - o Employee does not need a repeat test unless employee develops symptoms.

For employees living within Harris County Jurisdiction, please contact HCPH Workplace Investigation Team (WIT) at MDT_WIT_C19Reports@phs.hctx.net or by calling (832) 927-7575. For more information on how to get tested visit: covidcheck.hctx.net

Additional Resources

- [General Business Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers Responding to COVID-19 \(CDC\)](#)
- [Cleaning and Disinfecting for Community Facilities \(CDC\)](#)
- [Implementing Safety Practices for Critical Infrastructure Workers Who May Have Had Exposure to a Person with Suspected or Confirmed COVID-19 \(CDC\)](#)
- [When to Quarantine \(CDC\)](#)
- [Isolate If You Are Sick \(CDC\)](#)
- [Symptoms of Coronavirus CDC](#)
- [When You Can be Around Others After You Had or Likely Had COVID-19 \(CDC\)](#)
- [How to Protect Yourself & Others \(CDC\)](#)

Critical Infrastructure Employees

If an employee who was exposed to a confirmed COVID-19 case is **asymptomatic** and deemed critical and essential in their workplace, the employee can continue to work. They should be required to adhere to the following additional precautions prior to and during each work shift.

Employees returning to work under Critical Infrastructure must adhere to the following practices prior to and during their work shift:

- **Pre-Screen:** Department will measure the employee's temperature and assess symptoms prior to them starting work. Symptom and temperature checks should be completed as soon as employee enters the facility.
- **Regular Monitoring:** Departments need to ensure that employee self-monitors for symptoms, checks temperature twice a day (temperature checks should be 6 hours apart). As long as the employee doesn't have a fever or symptoms, they should self-monitor under the supervision of their employer's occupational health program. Managers should be aware of and maintain oversight, as well as ensure provisions are made for employee monitoring/preventive measures (e.g. thermometers available).
- **Wear a Mask:** Employee must wear a face mask properly at all times while in the workplace for 14 days after last exposure. Departments need to ensure facial coverings are available to employees.
- **Social Distance:** The employee should maintain 6 feet and practice social distancing as work duties permit in the workplace. Departments need to make every effort to ensure social distancing recommendations are followed by all employees.
- **Disinfect and Clean workspaces:** Clean and disinfect all areas such as offices, bathrooms, common areas, and shared electronic equipment routinely.

Exposed Employees (non-essential) in self-quarantine can return to work once:

- o Employee has completed 14 days of quarantine after last day of exposure and
- o Remains without COVID-19 Symptoms

If at any point exposed employees develop symptoms, they should be sent home to isolate and be tested. Criteria listed above should be met prior to returning to work.

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Reporting and Contact Tracing for EMPLOYERS

If an employee tests positive and went to work during their infectious period (starting from 48 hours before symptom onset until the time the person is isolated), the employer needs to make every effort to identify close contacts who may have been around the infected individual within 6 feet and for more than 15 minutes. For asymptomatic individuals, the infectious period would begin 48 hours before positive results. The employer should:

- Notify fellow employees of their possible exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace while maintaining confidentiality as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- Report suspected/confirmed case to the employee's local health department (LHD) and work with them to conduct contact tracing in the workplace.
- [Harris County Address Lookup](#) can be used to determine the appropriate LHD based on employee's address.
- When reporting to the local health department, collect the following information from all persons identified as close contacts:
 - o Employee Name
 - o DOB
 - o Address
 - o Phone Numbers
 - o Symptoms (if any)
 - o Testing info (if tested)
 - o Last Day of Work
 - o Work Address
 - o Department/Program/Section
 - o Supervisor Name and Phone Number
- For employees living within Harris County Jurisdiction, please contact HCPH Workplace Investigation Team (WIT) at MDT_WIT_C19Reports@phs.hctx.net or by calling (832) 927-7575. For more information on how to get tested visit: covidcheck.hctx.net
- For employees that did not come in close contact with the positive employee, no further action is needed. Non-exposed employees can continue to work with normal precautions.

Contact Tracing for EMPLOYEES who have Tested Positive

Testing for COVID-19 is recommended for all individuals who are a close contact to a person who tested positive for COVID-19, regardless of whether they develop symptoms. For more information on how to get tested you can visit: covidcheck.hctx.net

If you have been diagnosed with COVID-19 (viral test, not antibody) or suspected of having COVID-19, you may receive a phone call from your local health department to ask you some questions and complete Contact Tracing.

When your local health department calls you, they will not ask you for money, social security number, bank account information, salary information, credit card information or legal status.

Contact Tracing involves the following steps:

1. Your local health department will call you to check on your health. The contact tracer will ask you about your symptoms, medical history, who you've been in contact with and where you have spent time while you were sick.
 - Any information you share with the contact tracer is CONFIDENTIAL. This means that your personal and medical information will be kept private and only shared with someone who may need to know, like your healthcare provider.
2. You will be asked to stay home and self-isolate, if you're not doing so already.
 - Self-isolation means staying at home in a specific room away from other people and pets, and using a separate bathroom, if possible.
 - Self-isolation helps slow the spread of COVID-19 and can keep your family, friends, and community safe
3. Continue to monitor your health during self-isolation. If your symptoms worsen or become severe, you should seek medical attention. Severe symptoms include:
 - Trouble breathing
 - Persistent pain or pressure in the chest
 - Confusion
 - Inability to wake or stay awake, or
 - Bluish lips or face

If you need support or assistance while in self-isolation, your local health department may be able to provide assistance.

If you live in Harris County, you can call (832) 827-7575.

If you live in the City of Houston, you can call (832) 393-5080.



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Contact Tracing for Exposed Employees (Close Contacts)

Testing for COVID-19 is recommended for all individuals who are a close contact to a person who tested positive for COVID-19, regardless of whether they develop symptoms. For more information on how to get tested you can visit: covidcheck.hctx.net

1. If you have been in close contact with someone who has COVID-19, a Contact Tracer from your local health department may call you to notify you that you may have been exposed to COVID-19.
 - Any information you share with the contact tracer is CONFIDENTIAL. This means that your personal and medical information will be kept private and only shared with someone who may need to know, like your healthcare provider.
2. The Contact Tracer will ask you to stay at home and self-quarantine for 14-days, starting from the last day you were possibly exposed to COVID-19.
 - Self-quarantine means staying at home, monitoring your health, and maintaining social distancing (at least 6 feet) from others at all times.
3. The Contact Tracer will provide information about COVID-19 testing in your area and provide guidance on next steps.
 - If you need support or assistance while in self-isolation, your local health department may be able to provide assistance.
4. While you are in self-quarantine, you should take your temperature twice a day, watch for fever and other symptoms of COVID-19 and notify your local health department if you develop symptoms.
5. If you become ill during the 14-days of self-quarantine, you should notify your local health department and seek medical attention if your symptoms worsen or become severe. Emergency warning symptoms include:
 - Trouble breathing
 - Persistent pain or pressure in the chest
 - Confusion
 - Inability to wake or stay awake, or
 - Bluish lips or face

We can all work together to help slow the spread of COVID-19.

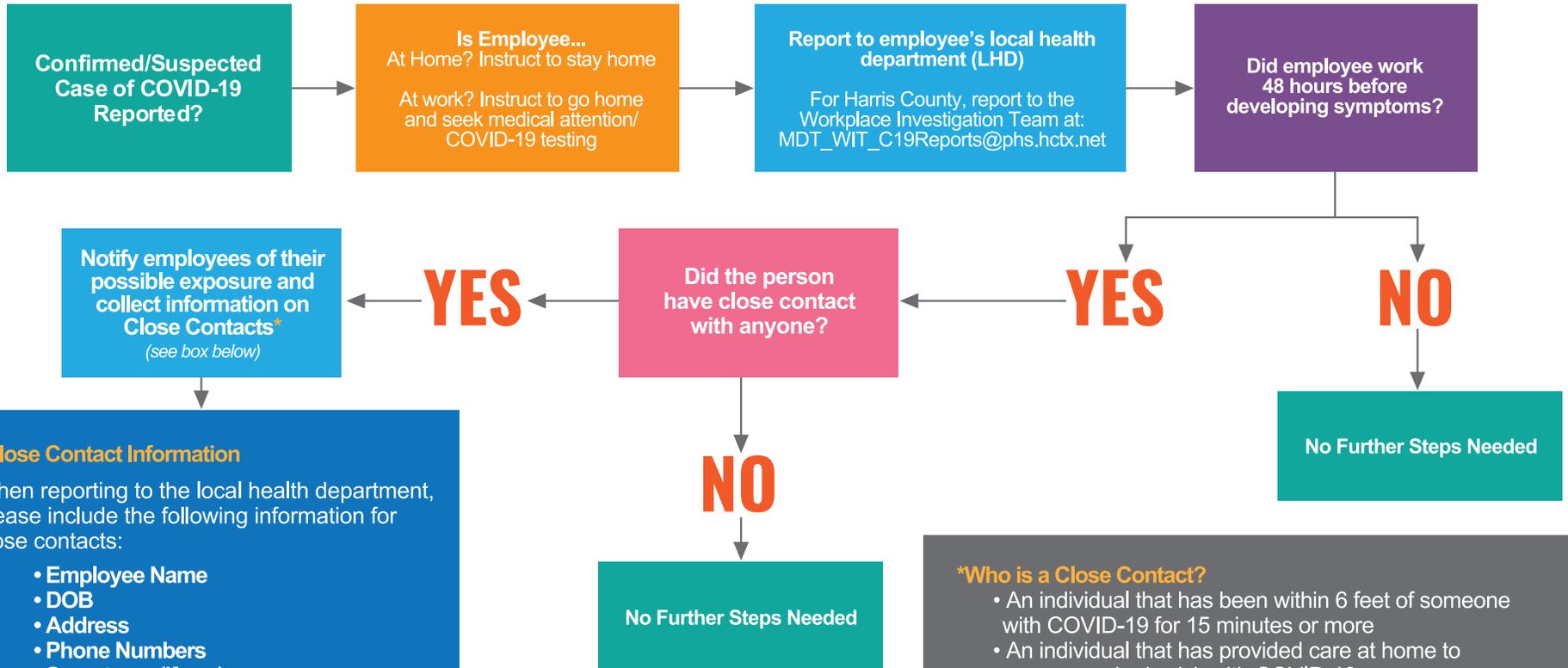
If you need support or assistance or testing information while in self-quarantine, your local health department may be able to provide assistance.

If you live in Harris County, you can call (832) 827-7575.

If you live in the City of Houston, you can call (832) 393-5080.

Contact Tracing Infographic: www.cdc.gov

Contact Tracing for Employers



*Close Contact Information

When reporting to the local health department, please include the following information for close contacts:

- Employee Name
- DOB
- Address
- Phone Numbers
- Symptoms (if any)
- Testing info (if tested)
- Last Day of Work
- Work Address
- Department/Program/Section
- Supervisor Name and Phone Number

Thank you for helping us to reduce the spread of COVID in our community and working to ensure staff and workspaces are safe for individuals. Someone from the LHD will be reaching out.

*Who is a Close Contact?

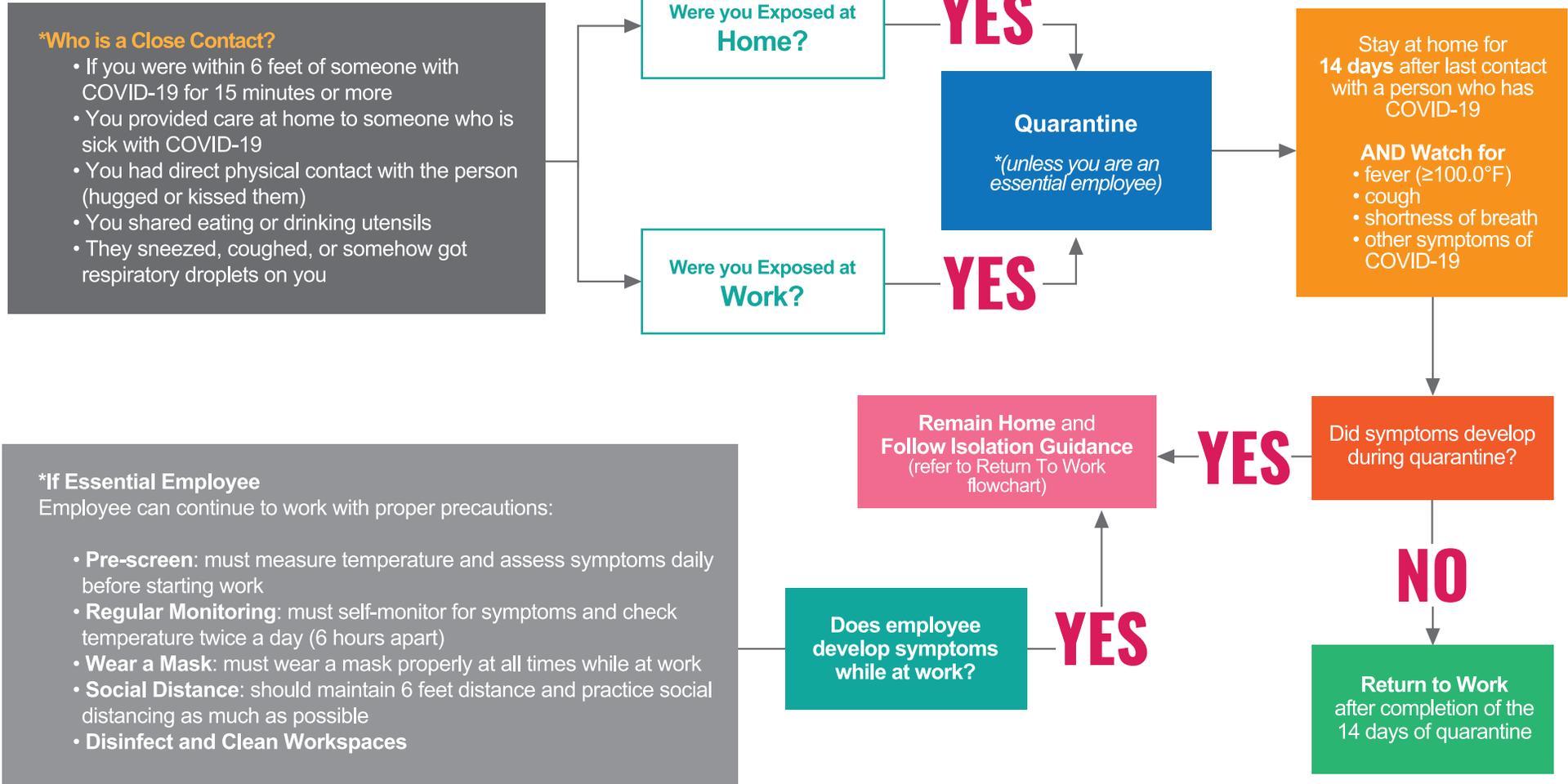
- An individual that has been within 6 feet of someone with COVID-19 for 15 minutes or more
- An individual that has provided care at home to someone who is sick with COVID-19
- An individual that has had direct physical contact with the person (hugged or kissed them)
- An individual that has shared eating or drinking utensils
- An individual that was sneezed, coughed, or somehow got respiratory droplets on you

Who is a suspected case of COVID-19?

Someone who has symptoms that could be COVID-19 but has not been tested or test results are pending

Employees Exposed to Individuals with COVID-19

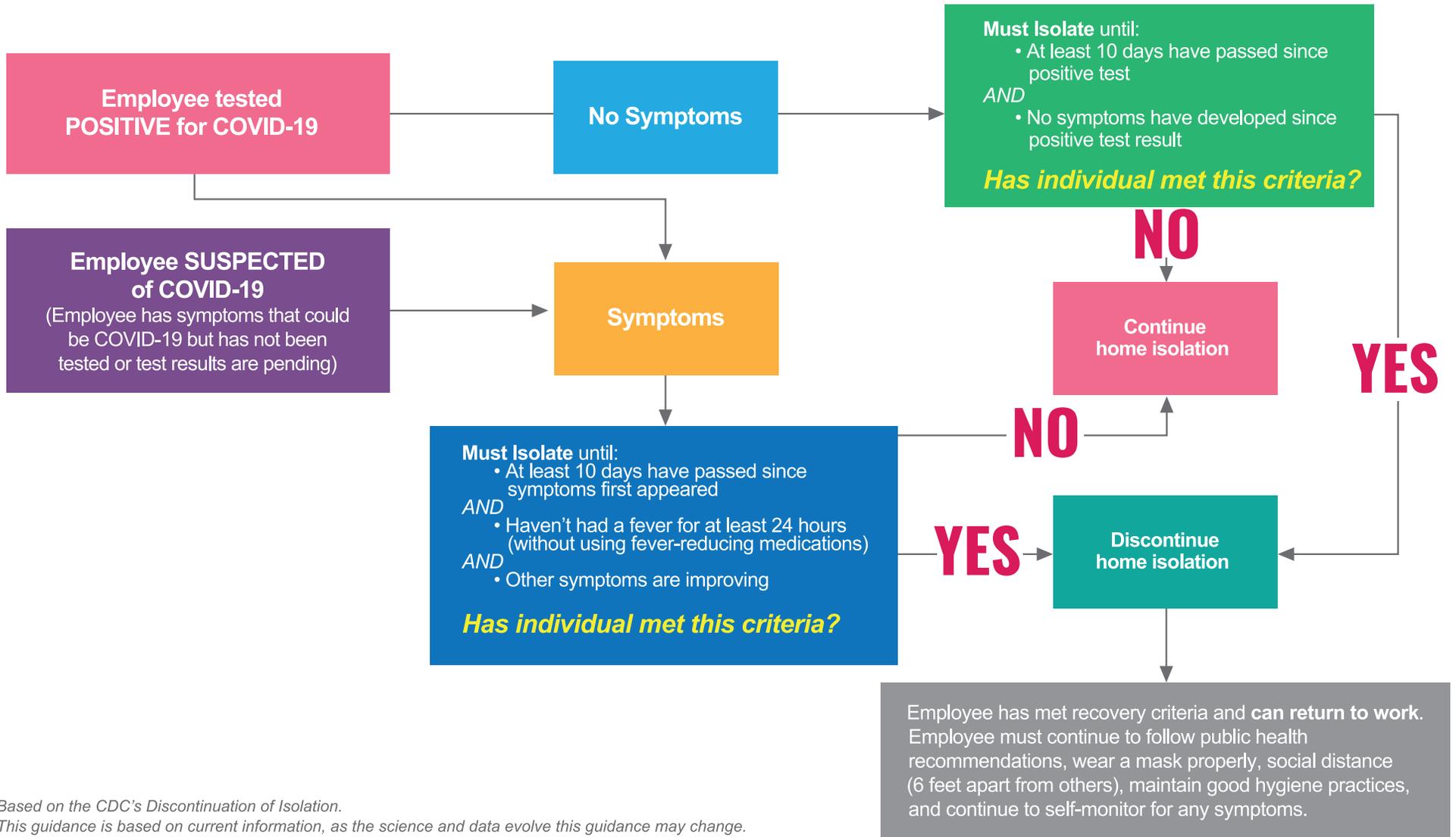
Individuals who have been in close contact to someone with COVID-19 must quarantine for 14 days



Based on the CDC's Discontinuation of Isolation.
This guidance is based on current information, as the science and data evolve this guidance may change.

Return To Work

Employees who test positive for COVID-19 may not return to work until they meet CDC/DSHS criteria for discontinuation of isolation.



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This guidance is based on current information, as the science and data evolve this guidance may change.