Get the facts on coronavirus

What is the coronavirus?

The coronavirus is a family of viruses, some of which can infect people and animals, named for crown-like spikes on their surfaces. Coronaviruses are common in humans and often cause mild upper respiratory tract infections. COVID-19, which stands for coronavirus disease 2019, is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Rarely coronaviruses are capable of causing severe illnesses like COVID-19. COVID-19 is the name of the disease, not the virus.

What are the COVID-19 symptoms?

Symptoms of COVID-19 can include fever, cough and breathing trouble. Most people develop only mild symptoms. Preliminary information indicates people over 60 and those with other medical complications develop more severe symptoms, including pneumonia, which can be fatal.

How is the virus that causes COVID-19 spread?

The new coronavirus is most commonly spread from an infected person to others through coughing or sneezing, close contact (within 6 ft.) with an infected person for a prolonged period of time, or touching a surface with the virus on it and then touching your mouth, nose or eyes before washing your hands. Therefore, it is important that students and staff use proper respiratory etiquette by covering their mouths and noses with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. Tissues should then be immediately disposed of properly. If no tissue is available, it is recommended to use the inside of the elbow or shirtsleeve. Hands should not be used to cover your mouth or nose. Also, it is important to wash hands after handling a dirty tissue or other soiled material.

Why should schools and colleges be so concerned?

Schools and colleges, by their very nature, may serve as a point of contact for the virus. Students and staff can easily spread the disease to other students, staff and their families. Because of this, employer pandemic plans may include issues around leave policies, essential personnel, and protection of employees who have contact with staff and students with known or suspected infection. It's critical that unions be involved in the planning process.

Are there certain students or staff who may be at special risk?

Anyone can get the coronavirus (even healthy people), and serious problems from the coronavirus can happen at any age. However, people of any age with chronic medical conditions (such as pulmonary disease, including asthma, diabetes, neuromuscular disorders or heart disease), and people age 60 years and older are more likely to get complications from the coronavirus. Pregnant women working in or attending schools should follow the same guidance as the general public about staying home when sick, hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, and routine cleaning. It's still unclear what the effects of the virus are for pregnant women and they should consult their physician.

Is there a COVID-19 vaccination available?

There is no COVID-19 vaccine available. It is currently being developed and is predicted to be available in about 18 months.

What can families, students, and school personnel do to keep from getting sick and spreading COVID-19?

The most effective ways are: Practicing good hand hygiene; adhering to proper respiratory etiquette; keeping oneself healthy (good nutrition, sleep and exercise) and staying home when you are sick. Students, staff, and their families must take personal responsibility for helping to slow the spread of the virus by practicing these steps.

What is considered appropriate hand hygiene?

Proper hand hygiene by students and staff is an important tool in combating the spread of the coronavirus. The best hand hygiene is traditional hand washing (with soap and warm water, lathering for a minimum of 20 seconds). If soap and water are not available, alcohol-based hand sanitizers (60 percent alcohol or greater) can help.

Can the virus live on surfaces, such as computer keyboards?

Yes, viruses may be spread when a person touches droplets left by coughs and sneezes on hard surfaces or objects and then touches his or her mouth or nose. As part of standard infection control practices in school settings, routine cleaning should be continued with extra attention paid to surfaces that are touched most often by different individuals. Specific high-risk locations within a school warrant cleaning and disinfection before a confirmed case of COVID-19. These include health offices, lunchrooms, athletic rooms and other frequently touched surfaces. If there is a confirmed case of COVID-19 in the school setting, the custodial staff should perform cleaning and disinfection of all frequently touched areas in schools. Custodians should be given adequate training and supplies to address any additional cleaning and disinfection practices.

What actions can school employees take?

Remember to take every day measures that are always recommended to prevent the spread of respiratory viruses. If you feel sick with fever, cough, or difficulty breathing, and have traveled to China or were in close contact with someone with COVID-19 in the 14 days before you began to feel sick, seek medical care. Before you go to a doctor's office or emergency room, call ahead and tell them about your recent travel and your symptoms. Keep your school district informed.

If I miss work for a prolonged period due to illness or to care for an ill family member, will I be assured of job, pay, benefit and other work protections?

Collective bargaining rights must be respected. Workers should not suffer loss of pay, benefits or other rights due to reasons related to the outbreak. Honoring contract rights is also an important tool in preventing the spread of the virus in the workplace by providing incentive to ill employees to stay at home. If any contract issues do arise related to COVID-19, contact your local president immediately.

When must a school close?

In the recently released New York State Department of Health and the New York State Education Department School (PreK-12) Guidance: COVID-19, the NY State Department of Health requires an initial 24-hour closure when a student or staff member attended a school prior to being confirmed as a COVID-19 case. This will begin an investigation to determine the contacts the infected person had within the school environment. That investigation will inform the plan determined by the local department of health as to any further closure, or other necessary precautions to take as well as actions for future positive COVID-19 cases.

The school must take immediate steps to clean and disinfect the school building(s) where the student or staff had contact prior to testing positive for COVID-19 during the initial 24-hour closing period. The disinfecting must be done according to NY State Department of Health guidelines and must be completed before any students return to school.

Where can I find more information on COVID-19 as it relates to schools?

There are still many unanswered questions and the situation is likely to change and evolve rapidly, refer to **www.nysut.org** for the latest information and the links below:

New York State Education Department Information and Guidance for Schools

American Federation of Teachers resources on the coronavirus

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Guidance for Schools

U.S. Department of Education Information for Schools and School Personnel

New York State Department of Health

Novel Coronavirus Hotline: 1-888-364-3065

Sources: AFT, NEA, CDC, NYSDOH, NYSED, and NYSUT