

Complete your COVID-19 back-to-school checklist

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Families and school districts are weighing difficult decisions on whether to return to school in person, online or a combination of both during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"No matter what education model is chosen—in-person, [distance learning](#) or a hybrid of the two, we want to provide guidance to parents, children, teachers and staff on how to stay as safe and healthy as possible this [school year](#)," says Nipunie Rajapakse, M.D., a pediatric infectious disease specialist at Mayo Clinic. "These tips will be familiar, and they continue to be the most effective ways we have to minimize the risk of COVID-19 exposure and spread. Certain strategies may be more effective for certain age groups of children. A combination of strategies is important because no single measure provides 100% protection from exposure," says Dr. Rajapakse.

Practice safe distancing

When possible, follow safe social distancing of at least 6 feet, even when wearing a mask.

"COVID-19 is primarily spread from person to person through respiratory droplets released into the air when coughing, sneezing, talking or singing," Dr. Rajapakse says. "When you're unable to wear a mask, such as when eating in the cafeteria, social distancing is even more critical to reduce the risk of virus transmission."

Wear a mask

Wear a mask to limit the spread of respiratory droplets.

"It's a great idea for students, teachers and staff to keep a clean backup mask somewhere convenient, like their backpack, locker or desk," notes Dr. Rajapakse. "Make sure to clearly label your child's mask with his or her name, and teach children never to share or trade [masks](#) with others."

Clean your hands frequently

Wash your hands with soap and water, or apply and use hand sanitizer frequently. For appropriate use of hand sanitizer, follow these steps:

Apply one to two squirts of sanitizer to the palm of one hand, enough to cover all surfaces of the hands.

Rub the sanitizer over all the surfaces of hands, fingers and nails until dry. This should take at least 20 seconds.

Keep a to-go size [hand](#) sanitizer container nearby.

Cleaning hands regularly throughout the day is very important, especially before eating, after using the bathroom, or before and after touching shared surfaces or your mask," Dr. Rajapakse says.

Disinfect high-touch surfaces

Disinfect surfaces routinely and immediately if they become visibly soiled. Disinfect items frequently touched such as light switches, [door handles](#), faucets and keyboards. Perform symptom self-checks and stay home if sick.

Every day before going to school, check for symptoms of illness, especially COVID-19 symptoms, such as new-onset cough or shortness of breath. If you are sick, avoid spreading germs by staying home from school or other activities.

"Even though it may seem like just a minor runny nose or cough, staying home from school or work is the right thing to do to reduce the risk of exposing others to not only COVID-19, but other respiratory viruses like influenza, as well," Dr. Rajapakse says. "Everyone over 6 months old is strongly recommended to get an influenza vaccine this fall. During this

pandemic we have also seen many children fall behind on their routine vaccines so it is important to check with your primary care provider and ensure all of your child's vaccines are up to date prior to returning to school."

School year will be a challenge

No matter which learning model is chosen by communities, the school year is going to be challenging.

"We know how important schools and teachers are—supporting students' education, social development and [mental health](#)," Dr. Rajapakse says. "Ultimately, how to participate in [school](#) will be a family decision, weighing all the factors in your specific circumstances—your own family's health risks, the academic needs of your children, your work demands and, of course, the amount of COVID-19 transmission in your communities."

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