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## Frequently Asked Questions for Youth, Adult and School Sports

### Why do we need guidance for youth, adult and school sports?

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has weighed heavily on everyone. We all need healthy outlets and activities to exercise, challenge ourselves and enjoy time with our peers. This is important to our mental and physical health and well-being. For many kids and adults, sports provide an outlet where they can release pent-up energy, socialize, learn leadership skills, gain fitness, and build athleticism.

Broadly, the state's [Return to Play RI: Youth, Adult & School Sports Guidance](#) is a framework that provides best practices for those who wish to participate in sports while reducing the risk of exposure to COVID-19, consistent with the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) guidelines](#). The CDC's central principle is that the more people interact, the closer the physical interaction, the more that equipment is shared by multiple players, and/or the longer the interaction, the higher the risk of spreading COVID-19. To be clear, adhering to the guidelines will reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19 associated with sports activities, but will not prevent exposure.

School sports organizations are subject to the [Back to School RI: Health and Safety Guidance to Reopen Rhode Island's Elementary and Secondary Schools](#) and the rules and regulations of the sports organizations that govern school sports, such as local school committees and the [Rhode Island Interscholastic League](#).

This guidance focuses on lower-risk approaches to engaging in sports activities and aligns with the current [executive orders](#) and [Rhode Island Department of Health \(RIDOH\) regulations](#).

### What are the basic elements of the youth, adult and school sports guidance?

The key principles of the youth, adult and school sports guidance include:

- Stable groups: same players and same coaches, in the same group for the season.
- Physical distancing of six feet between participants is encouraged while engaged in active play. When not engaged in active play, six feet of physical distance should be maintained between participants.
- Face coverings: Participants, coaches, staff, volunteers, and spectators should wear a face covering, especially when unable to easily, continuously, and measurably maintain six feet of physical distance. (Exceptions exist for children younger than age two and those who can't wear one for health or developmental reasons.)
- Games are allowed for lower risk and moderate risk sports (see descriptions below) between stable groups from states that are not on [RIDOH's list](#) of locations with a high COVID-19 community spreadrate. However, modifications to play (e.g., reducing shared equipment) are recommended when practicing or competing for moderate and low risk sports, and any activities that bring people into close contact increase the risk of spreading COVID-19 and the related need to quarantine.
- Higher risk sports should focus on drills and practice. Participants shouldn't participate in games, scrimmages, or high-risk practice activities within the team or with other teams.
- Spectators are allowed but limited in number, in accordance with current [executive orders](#) and [reopeningri.com](#) guidance for venue of assembly gathering sizes. Spectators, players,

coaches, volunteers, and other on-site personnel are included in the total venue of assembly gathering size. No more than two spectators per player is recommended. Spectators should maintain six feet of physical distance between household groups and 14 feet from the outer limit of play.

- Don't play if you're sick, even with mild symptoms, or if you are positive for COVID-19.
- Cooperate with RIDOH investigators with regard to possible COVID-19 exposure and adhere to all quarantine requirements.
- Wash or sanitize hands before, during, and after sports activities.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces on the field, court, or playing surface.
- Discourage use of shared equipment, including bats, racquets, gloves, etc.

#### **How long will this guidance be in effect?**

This guidance will be in effect from September 11, 2020, until further notice. Data will drive its duration. It will depend on what RIDOH epidemiologists are observing in the rate of spread of COVID-19 and related metrics across the state. Data on the key indicators – infections, hospitalizations, testing, contact tracing, and deaths – will drive decision making.

#### **How many people can participate on teams? What are the limits?**

The smaller and more constant the stable group, the lower the risk of spreading COVID-19. During Phase III, the number of people on a team should be maintained at the lowest number possible. The risk of COVID-19 rises as the size of any group increases. Thus, the more people that are engaged in sports activity together, the higher the risk of the spread of COVID-19. Stable groups mean the same athletes and coaches will be in the same groups every day they conduct practices, games, or team meetings. Athletes should not change from one group to another. That would destabilize the group and increase the chance of someone (who may be COVID-19 positive but asymptomatic) spreading the virus. Parents are encouraged to choose one stable group per child per season. Adult athletes are encouraged not to change from one stable group to another.

#### **What types of sports can play games?**

As more research comes in on COVID-19 risks associated with sports, we have adjusted our recommendations on the types of sports that may play games. Reflecting recommendations by the [United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee](#), the [National Federation of High School Associations \(NFHS\)](#) and other sports organizations, we recommend that higher-risk sports do not play games as the risk for spread of COVID-19 is greater for these sports. Lower-risk or moderate-risk sports may participate in games with modifications that reduce close physical or face-to-face contact. However, game playing increases the risk of COVID-19 spread. The risk increases with each level of sports risk; the guidance makes clear the risk levels and recommends taking measures to reduce risk. Higher-risk sports should focus instead on drills and practice. However, every sports organization should continue to look for ways to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19, regardless of the risk level of their sport.

#### **What sports are considered higher risk?**

Sports like wrestling, football, boys/men's lacrosse, competitive cheer and dance are considered higher risk because they involve close, sustained contact between participants. That means that the respiratory particles that carry COVID-19 will travel more easily between participants.

#### **What sports are considered lower or moderate risk?**

Lower-risk sports are those which naturally allow for physical distancing and don't involve shared equipment, or the equipment can be cleaned between uses. Examples of lower-risk sports include individual running events, throwing events, individual swimming events, golf, weightlifting, alpine skiing, sideline cheer, single sculling, cross country running (with staggered starts), or solo sailing.

Moderate-risk sports involve intermittent contact, or they may involve sustained contact but they use protective equipment that reduces the chance that COVID-19 respiratory particles will transmit between participants. Moderate-risk sports also may use equipment that can't be cleaned between participants' use, so it's especially important to sanitize hands frequently. Examples of moderate-risk sports include basketball, volleyball, baseball, softball, soccer, water polo, gymnastics, ice hockey, field hockey, tennis, swimming relays, pole vault, high jump, long jump, girls/women's lacrosse, crew with two or more rowers in shell, 7 on 7 football, or team sailing. Note that some moderate-risk sports can lower their risk through game modifications, appropriate cleaning of equipment and use of masks by participants.

### **How can we modify our sport to lower the risk?**

Coaches, players and parents can limit the COVID-19 risk associated with sports by modifying games and practices – but also by being careful about what you do BEFORE and AFTER the game or practice. If your team goes out socially after practice, are you still practicing physical distancing? If you carpool to the game, are you wearing masks? If you or a teammate tests positive for COVID-19 just after practice, your entire team may need to quarantine, because it will be hard to know whether an athlete got the virus on or off the field.

For specific ideas on how you can modify your sport to reduce risk, see the [Return to Play RI: Phase III Youth, Adult & School Sports Guidelines](#). The [Rhode Island Interscholastic League](#) had developed [modifications](#) for some high school sports. Many local and national sports organizations have already developed plans to reduce risk; so look at their work or reach out to your neighboring communities and share best practices.

### **Do we need to submit a plan for sports games or practices?**

No, you don't need to submit a plan to the State, but you are required to write your plan down and are encouraged to share it with the players, parents, volunteers and coaches involved in your team or league. This helps get everyone on the same page and will limit the time you spend reminding people about the importance of physical distancing, face masks, and game modifications. While the State is not officially approving plans, we remain available to help you think through best practices and modifications that could help you reduce the risk of COVID-19 among your fellow athletes and their families. Email [cynthia.elder@dem.ri.gov](mailto:cynthia.elder@dem.ri.gov) for information and assistance.

### **How many spectators can attend events?**

We recommend no more than two spectators in attendance per player household. The number of spectators who can attend a practice or game also depends upon the size of the sports team and venue. Every sports venue is subject to current [executive orders](#) regarding venues of assembly sizes and capacity limits and other applicable RIDOH Regulations, executive orders and state guidance. Currently, an indoor event venue may have up to 125 people and an outdoor event venue may have up to 250 people (spectators, players, coaches, volunteers, vendors, etc.) or 66% capacity (with six-foot physical distancing), whichever number is smaller.

It is critical that spectators be at least six feet from each other, unless coming from the same household and is important for spectators to be at least 14 feet from the outer limit of play, maintain at least six feet of physical distance between household groups, and wear a face covering at all times (with exceptions for small children or those who cannot wear one for health or developmental reasons).

Venues may choose to eliminate or reduce the number of spectators even further in accordance with school or host facility protocols and procedures (e.g. capacity limits) and the ability to properly sanitize the venue before and after a games or practices.

### **Will physical distancing rules be in effect?**

Yes, physical distancing remains important to youth, adult and school sports. Coaches and volunteers should always maintain a six-foot physical distance from players. Activities should be designed to maintain at least a six-foot physical distance whenever possible, but 14 feet of distance is optimal. Stable groups sharing a practice space, whether indoors or outdoors, should maintain a minimum of 14 feet from the outer limit of play areas. (See above for definition of stable groups.)

### **How can you do physical distancing and do sports?**

Although this guidance is not sport-specific, different sports and outside activities pose different levels of risk. While games are allowed between teams playing lower risk and moderate risk sports, every effort should still be made to lower the level of risk. The more space between players, the better. Look for ways to modify your sport to reduce physical closeness. COVID-19 is transmitted from person to person mainly through respiratory droplets that are produced when an infected person talks, sneezes, or coughs. Droplets can be spread even when infectious people have no symptoms or mild symptoms of COVID 19. So, examine your sports experience – from the moment you enter to the moment you leave, and consider how you can increase physical distancing. For example, are athletes six feet apart on the bench, in the dugout, and on the sidelines? Is their gear physically distanced so they don't group together for water breaks?

Higher risk sports should continue to avoid games or any competitive game-like activity that involves close, sustained contact between participants, lack of significant protective barriers and high probability that respiratory particles will be transmitted between participants. We advise coaches to emphasize the development of skills, not competition, for higher risk sports during Phase III of reopening.

### **Do athletes have to wear face masks? That could be hard when they're running or exercising.**

The guidelines encourage face coverings for all participants, but they're not required for players when they are engaged in active play within a stable group and maintaining six feet of physical distance most of the time. Face coverings are always required for coaches, volunteers, spectators, and adult players when not able to maintain six feet of physical distance. The golden rule is: Wear a face mask whenever possible, whether you're an athlete or a fan. This is how we help to keep each other safe and healthy. Athletes should also be encouraged to bring extra face coverings and change into clean, dry face coverings in the event their face coverings become wet or soiled while engaged in sports activities.

### **Do we really have to quarantine if a teammate tests positive for COVID-19?**

If you have been in close contact with a teammate who has tested positive for COVID-19, you and anyone else who has been in close contact must quarantine for 14 days. For COVID-19, a close contact is anyone who was within six feet of an infected person for at least 15 minutes. An infected person can spread COVID-19 starting from 48 hours (or two days) before the person had any symptoms or tested positive for COVID-19. If you are contacted by COVID-19 contact tracers from the RIDOH, we urge you to cooperate fully with investigators, share the names and contact information of anyone who could potentially be exposed, and follow all quarantine orders. This is the ultimate expression of team spirit – caring more about the health and wellness of our whole team than our own personal interest.

### **How can participants keep their hands clean if there's no restroom on site?**

Organizers and sponsors of sports programs and leagues will need to make sure that players, staff, and coaches have hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol if soap and water are not available. We have known since the start of the pandemic that hand washing is one of the easiest, most effective ways to slow the spread of the virus. We strongly advise

parents to make sure their kids wash their hands vigorously before and after participating in sports. Also, organizers and coaches should schedule daily cleaning, frequent cleaning of high-touch areas, and cleaning and disinfection between sessions.

#### **How risky is it for kids to share bats, balls and other gear?**

It is risky. This guidance discourages sharing equipment. By shared equipment, we mean protective gear, balls, bats, racquets, mats, water bottles, or other items that are touched by multiple people. To reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread, we ask coaches, volunteers, parents, and players to minimize the sharing of equipment and clean and disinfect items between uses by different players. Participants should bring their own equipment when possible.

#### **How are we going to keep kids from high-fiving and hugging?**

It's natural for kids to high-five when they've scored a goal or to hug a friend they haven't seen in a while. However, we're counting on coaches and parents to educate – and model – safe behaviors, just as you do in other elements of coaching and parenting. Give them alternatives and be creative, like cheers or dance moves that can be done from a safe distance.

#### **Why can't we play football this fall?**

Football has a long tradition in Rhode Island and is important for many student-athletes and their communities. Making the decision not to allow football this fall season was not easy! The decision was carefully vetted in consultation with the RIDOH, the Rhode Island Department of Education, and the Rhode Island Interscholastic League (RIIL). The experts involved considered factors such as risk of spread due to close contact, the health and safety of the players and coaches, and timing in relation to school opening. The RIIL hopes to reschedule football for a new season in 2021.

The latest research shows that the greatest risk for getting COVID-19 is through the spread of respiratory droplets when an infected person talks, coughs, sneezes, or even breathes. The higher the exertion level of breath, such as from yelling or panting from exercise, the farther the droplets may travel. Football requires close physical contact and close contact breathing on almost every play – in the huddles where the players discuss the play, across the offensive and defensive lines, and in the tackling that results in players piling on top of one another. The sport also tends to involve large rosters of coaches and players. The more people engaged in close play, the higher the risk of spreading droplets. The higher risk of spread associated with football led to the conclusion that initiating a season this fall does not make sense from a public health and safety standpoint. A majority of states have reached this same conclusion.

#### **Why can't high schoolers play competitive volleyball this fall season?**

A primary objective of the RIIL is to allow every student-athlete the opportunity to participate in their chosen sport in the 2020-2021 school year. After consulting with school superintendents and principals, RIIL decided to move volleyball to later in the school year. The primary reason is that high school volleyball is the only fall sport that is played indoors, and many schools are using gymnasium for classrooms or other purposes as they prepare for return to school. Districts are also navigating many new procedures and protocols (e.g., cleaning and disinfecting) to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and simply do not have the resources to clean gymnasiums before and after games or practices. On top of these challenges, indoor settings are higher risk than outdoor settings and require additional mitigation measures.

#### **What about indoor facilities like hockey rinks, basketball courts, and indoor soccer?**

Indoor facilities that are large enough to accommodate multiple stable groups at one time, while still complying with their COVID-19 Control Plan, the indoor stable group size, venue of assembly limits, and maintaining 14 feet of physical distance between stable groups, are

allowed. Care should be taken to ensure stable groups do not intermingle. Facilities may want to consider staggered practice times or dividing the rink or court. In addition, high risk sports should not have games inside or outside during Phase III. Spectators may be allowed when they can be physically distanced at least 14 feet from the outer limit of play and when the capacity of the facility allows for additional people, no more than 125 people total or 66% of total capacity for all persons in the facility.

#### **What are the rules for road races and walkathons?**

Road races and outdoor walkathons are considered public events or venues of assembly. This means that they can have up to 250 people per event, including athletes, staff, volunteers, spectators, vendors, and any other participants. They should still follow all applicable guidance and executive orders, including [Return to Play RI: Phase III youth, adult & school sports guidelines](#) regarding physical distancing, face coverings, hand hygiene, and discouraging use of shared equipment.

#### **Is it safe to use a public basketball court? What about pick-up games and playgrounds?**

An open pick-up game where participants come and go presents much greater risks than a neighborhood or league practice that includes the same small number of players throughout a season.

Regardless of the sport, pick-up games will be riskier if the group of players doesn't remain consistent. Parents can play a role in keeping their families safe by organizing athletic activities in public spaces with the same group of kids. Whether you're at the local court, playground, or park, remember to bring hand sanitizer, wear face coverings when not actively playing, avoid use of shared equipment, and maintain physical distance as much as possible.

#### **Are school sports following the same guidance?**

School sports organizations are required to follow the [Return to Play RI: Phase III youth, adult & school sports guidelines](#). School sports organizations are also subject to the [Back to School RI: Health and Safety Guidance to Reopen Rhode Island's Elementary and Secondary Schools](#) and the rules and regulations of the sports organizations that govern school sports. For high school sports, please visit the [Rhode Island Interscholastic League's COVID-19 information page](#). For elementary and middle school sports, please check with your principal or school athletic director.