

Guidance for Mitigating COVID-19 at Higher Education Institutions

8/31/2021

Updates for this guidance:

- Updated the use of the term “face covering” to “well-fitted masks.”
- Incorporated into the document the CDC Community Transmission recommendations, page 3.
- Incorporated updated links for transportation recommendations and requirements, page 5.
- Updated testing strategies to include testing of close contacts even if they are vaccinated per CDC recommendations, page 6.

This guidance offers recommendations to prevent COVID-19 transmission at institutes of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This document provides considerations for use at any institution of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic in developing plans for campus learning. It is meant to be flexible and to make it possible to tailor actions at each institution in ways that best suits the campus and their capacity. The level of mitigation efforts needed on campus will depend heavily on the levels of vaccine coverage on campus. Institutions should discuss ways they can monitor the overall vaccine trends on campus so they can adjust mitigation measures accordingly.

In developing these considerations, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) reviewed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Guidance for Higher Education, the American College Health Association guidance for COVID-19, and recommendations from MDH Higher Education workgroups. These workgroups were composed of representatives from colleges and universities across Minnesota.

Institutions should develop plans that outline communication strategies, actions, and activities that support a safe campus culture; address campus activities during the summer; prepare institutions for the fall term when on-campus traffic may be at its height; and maintain COVID-19 testing resources, contact tracing efforts, and the ability to respond to a surge on campus.

For additional resources related to higher education institutions, refer to [Institutes of Higher Education \(IHE\): COVID-19 \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/ihe.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/ihe.html).

For additional information on the basics of COVID-19, visit [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/index.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/index.html).

Recommendations and considerations

Promote vaccine and follow key strategies to prevent COVID-19 transmission

Vaccination is one of the best things anyone can do to prevent getting or spreading COVID-19. Visit [COVID-19 Vaccine \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/vaccine/index.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/vaccine/index.html).

Ways to promote vaccines and access to getting vaccinated:

- Host on-campus vaccination clinics.
- Provide transportation to off-campus vaccination sites.
- Use trusted people and sources to promote getting vaccinated.
- Offer flexible sick leave or flexible excused absence options for those who experience side effects after receiving the vaccine.
- Refer to [CDC: COVID-19 Vaccine Toolkit for Institutions of Higher Education \(IHE\), Community Colleges, and Technical Schools \(www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/toolkits/higher-education.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/toolkits/higher-education.html) for more information.

For those not vaccinated:

- Continue to wear well-fitted masks when around others.
 - Note: There is no longer a statewide requirement to wear masks in most settings. However, other federal, state, and/or local laws may require masks in some settings, and businesses may set their own requirements. In addition, those who are not vaccinated still risk getting and spreading COVID-19, so unvaccinated people are strongly encouraged to continue to wear well-fitted masks to protect themselves and others. For more information, visit [Recommendations for Wearing Masks \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facecover.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facecover.html).
- Continue to maintain at least 6 feet of physical distance from other households, as much as possible.

Vaccinated or not vaccinated, MDH strongly recommends that everyone:

- Wash their hands often.
- Follow guidance on staying home (quarantine) if they were exposed to someone who has COVID-19. People who are fully vaccinated may not need to quarantine in many situations. Refer to [Quarantine Guidance for COVID-19 \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/quarguide.pdf\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/quarguide.pdf) for more details.
- Stay home if they are sick. Visit [If You Are Sick or Test Positive: COVID-19 \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/sick.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/sick.html).

- Wear a well-fitted mask when recommended by MDH and CDC. Some campuses and settings (such as transportation) may require masks. For more information about when and how to wear masks, visit [Recommendations for Wearing Masks \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facecover.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facecover.html).
- Follow testing recommendations for when they travel, have COVID-19 symptoms, or are exposed to COVID-19. Visit [COVID-19 Testing \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/testsites/index.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/testsites/index.html) for information about who should get tested and how to get a test.

Recommendations for campus operations that minimize transmission

- To the extent possible, assess the level of vaccine coverage on campus and implement complementary mitigation efforts as needed.
- Institutions with lower or unknown levels of vaccine coverage should consider having extra spacing between people when bringing groups or classes together; consider between 3 and 6 feet depending on the space.
- Consider institution-level requirements or recommendations on masks in indoor environments, such as dorms or other environments with crowds and congestion, especially when:
 - Vaccination rates of the staff and student population are either low or unknown; or
 - The surrounding county has a substantial or high community transmission level. To find county-specific community transmission levels, refer to the [CDC COVID Data Tracker: COVID-19 Integrated County View \(covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view\)](https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view).
- Promote a culture of mask acceptance for those who have not been vaccinated and for those who choose to wear masks even after fully vaccinated.
- Maintain protocols to quickly identify sick students, faculty, or staff.
 - Encourage students, faculty, and staff to stay home when sick; consider sick and leave policies that support flexibility to academic programming and work when necessary.
 - Consider encouraging daily symptom screening of students, faculty, or staff. This can be achieved many different ways, from symptom screening apps to signs that people see daily and are posted throughout campus.
 - For example, have symptom check signs at key entry points, such as when entering a classroom, libraries, dining halls, residence halls, recreation centers, athletic venues, and student unions.
- Encourage students, staff, and faculty to review MDH and CDC guidance for travel when planning to leave campus for the year, arriving for summer or fall term, attending study abroad programs, or taking academic or personal breaks.
 - [Protect Yourself & Others: Traveling \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/prevention.html#travel\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/prevention.html#travel)
 - [CDC: COVID-19 Travel \(www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html)
 - [CDC: Guidance for Institutions of Higher Education \(IHEs\) \(www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html)
Refer to the “Study Abroad and Travel” section.

- Review worker recommendations and regulations: [OSHA Protecting Workers: Guidance on Mitigating and Preventing the Spread of COVID-19 in the Workplace \(www.osha.gov/coronavirus/safework\)](https://www.osha.gov/coronavirus/safework).
- Provide accommodations for higher risk and vulnerable populations. Visit [CDC: People with Certain Medical Conditions \(www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html). Employers must provide reasonable accommodations as required under existing federal and state law.
- Further, CDC recognizes that “long-standing systemic health and social inequities have put many racial and ethnic minority groups at increased risk of getting sick and dying from COVID-19. American Indian/Alaska Native, Black, and Hispanic persons are disproportionately affected by COVID-19; these disparities exist among all age groups, including school-aged children and young adults. Because of these disparities, in-person instruction on campuses might pose a greater risk of COVID-19 to disproportionately affected populations. For these reasons, health equity considerations related to in-person instruction are an integral part of decision-making. Addressing social and racial injustice and inequity is at the forefront of public health.”
 - [CDC: Guidance for Institutions of Higher Education \(IHEs\) \(www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html)
Refer to the “Health Equity” section

Transportation considerations

Masks are required on planes, buses, trains, and other forms of public transportation traveling into, within, or out of the United States and in U.S. transportation hubs, such as airports and stations. This order also covers transportation provided by universities or commercial companies (with a few limited exceptions), including university or commercial vehicles, shuttles, or buses.

- For more information, visit [CDC: Requirement for Face Masks on Public Transportation Conveyances and at Transportations Hubs \(www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/face-masks-public-transportation.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/face-masks-public-transportation.html).
- [CDC: Considerations for Non-emergency Vehicle Transportation for Tribal Communities During COVID-19 \(www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/tribal/non-ems-transportation.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/tribal/non-ems-transportation.html).

Support phased-in approaches to returning to campus

- Consider a phased or staggered approach when bringing students, faculty, and staff back to campus to minimize opportunities for congestion.
- Consider smaller activities or events at the beginning of the term, during welcome week activities, or at orientation events.
 - Consider this for at least the first two weeks of students returning to campus.
- Encourage activities to be held outside as much as possible.
- Promote activities or events that can be held with smaller groups of people.
- Keep prospective student tours to smaller groups and outside as much as possible.

Review strategies for classrooms, gyms, dining halls, common areas, and other similar environments on campus

- In environments where students, staff, and faculty will have designated areas to sit or be stationed, institutions are encouraged to maintain an environment where some extra spacing between people can be maintained, especially prior to and for the first couple of weeks of bringing the campus fully together.
 - As an example, consider 3 feet social distancing in classrooms, or 6 feet social distancing in gyms; especially if institutions are unsure of the vaccination levels on campus.
- For common areas, consider spacing moveable furniture to minimize crowding and congestion in common or seating areas where possible.
 - As an example, consider continued arrangement of chairs, tables, and furniture to support at least 6 feet between groups of people.
- Follow [Recommendations for Music Activities and Performances During COVID-19](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/musicguide.pdf) (www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/musicguide.pdf).
- In general, MDH does not recommend complete closure of common areas, as students will likely still gather in other areas, including in smaller rooms or areas that would promote transmission potential.

Implement housing plans that support reduced risks of transmission

- Consider having enough space for heads to be at least 6 feet apart in shared dorm rooms.
- For institutions that have lower vaccination rates, consider reducing capacity in dorms or dorm rooms to reduce the overall number of students in the building and congestion.
- Encourage students in residence halls to get vaccinated by having vaccination events as a way to allow for more activities.

Maintain testing plans for suspect COVID-19 cases

- Testing access is crucial to preventing COVID-19 transmission in higher education institutions. Without the ability to refer students, faculty, or staff to testing for COVID-19, there may be missed opportunities to quickly identify COVID-19 on your campus.
- Consider promoting this link to where people can find COVID-19 testing: [Find Testing Locations](https://mn.gov/covid19/get-tested/testing-locations/index.jsp) (mn.gov/covid19/get-tested/testing-locations/index.jsp).
- Institutes of higher education should also:
 - Have the capacity to test close contacts per recommendations and guidance by CDC and MDH: [Close Contacts and Tracing: COVID-19](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/close.html) (www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/close.html).
 - Consider strategies for broader testing when there is a surge on campus.

Testing strategies

- Close contacts of a COVID-19 case should be tested after exposure or if they become symptomatic, regardless of vaccination status. For further information on when to test, refer to [Recommendations for Responding to COVID-19 Cases and Outbreaks in Higher Education \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/ihecases.pdf\)](http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/ihecases.pdf).
- General testing recommendations and resources are available at [COVID-19 Testing \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/testsites/index.html\)](http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/testsites/index.html).
- MDH may also recommend broader testing if there is ongoing transmission in a group or dorm setting. Please reach out to MDH or local public health in these situations.
- If a campus has a cluster of three or more cases in a short time span, consider wider testing using the following criteria:
 - Are cases from around the same time period, or spread out over several weeks?
 - Are new cases traceable to previous cases, or is the source unknown?
 - MDH or local public health may recommend any of the following testing strategies, depending on the relationship between cases. These may include testing broadly on a floor, in a residence hall, or of team, club, class, or activity members.
 - Broader campus or community testing may be warranted if a campus continues to see an increase in cases and other control measures are not preventing further transmission.

Maintain contact tracing, isolation, and quarantine processes

- Information specific to higher education and contact tracing, isolation, and quarantine can be found at [Recommendations for Responding to COVID-19 Cases and Outbreaks in Higher Education \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/ihecases.pdf\)](http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/ihecases.pdf).
- Consider having isolation and quarantine accommodations for between 1% and 2.5% of the population who live on campus, or half of what you had at your peak during the 2020-2021 academic year. We expect that as vaccination rates increase, the need for isolation and quarantine space will decrease.
- Continue to report cases and clusters of cases to the Minnesota Department of Health by emailing the Higher Education Team at Health.HigherEd.COVID19@state.mn.us, or by filling out our higher ed form at [COVID-19 College and University Case Reporting \(redcap.health.state.mn.us/redcap/surveys/?s=KWF3TMAX7E\)](https://redcap.health.state.mn.us/redcap/surveys/?s=KWF3TMAX7E).

Monitor disease trends on campus and in your area to adjust mitigation levels as needed

- Adjust campus mitigation efforts based of disease transmission levels. Visit [Recommendations for Different Scenarios of COVID-19 Transmission Among Higher Education Institutions \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/iherecs.pdf\)](http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/iherecs.pdf).
- Use [Public Health Risk Measures \(mn.gov/covid19/data/response-prep/public-health-risk-measures.jsp\)](https://mn.gov/covid19/data/response-prep/public-health-risk-measures.jsp) to stay informed about community activity.

Higher education resources

- MDH's main webpage for higher education: [Institutes of Higher Education \(IHE\): COVID-19 \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/ihe.html\)](http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/ihe.html).
- American College Health Association (ACHA) Guidelines: [Considerations for Reopening Institutions of Higher Education for the Fall Semester 2021 \(www.acha.org/documents/resources/guidelines/ACHA_Considerations_for_Reopening_IHEs_for_Fall_2021_5.25.21.pdf\)](http://www.acha.org/documents/resources/guidelines/ACHA_Considerations_for_Reopening_IHEs_for_Fall_2021_5.25.21.pdf).
- American College Health Association: [COVID-19 Resources \(www.acha.org/ACHA/Resources/COVID-19_Novel_Coronavirus/ACHA/Resources/Topics/2019_Novel_Coronavirus_2019-nCoV.aspx\)](http://www.acha.org/ACHA/Resources/COVID-19_Novel_Coronavirus/ACHA/Resources/Topics/2019_Novel_Coronavirus_2019-nCoV.aspx).
- CDC Guidance for IHE: [Considerations for Institutes of Higher Education \(www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html\)](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html).
- National Intramural and Recreational Sports Association's updates: [Coronavirus Updates & Resources for Campus Recreation \(nirsa.net/nirsa/covid19/\)](http://nirsa.net/nirsa/covid19/).



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