

# Recommendations for Responding to Different Scenarios of COVID-19 Transmission at Institutions of Higher Education

12/27/2021

Updates to this document include:

- Revisions to Institutions of Higher Education COVID-19 reporting and suggestions for keeping campuses informed.
- Additional indicator in Scenario Three that aligns with when institutions report threshold indicators to MDH.

This document is organized into recommendations for responding to different scenarios based on COVID-19 transmission on and around a campus. Many institutions use color codes to indicate the scenario or transmission level, which are also referenced in this document. The recommended actions are meant to help minimize transmission of COVID-19 for students, staff, and faculty. The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) and the Office of Higher Education (OHE) recognize there are diverse learning environments that will require teams to use thoughtful strategies when applying guidance to meet the health and safety needs of all students, faculty, and staff.

The scenarios are built on the following principles:

**The scenarios are “stackable.” For example, Scenario 2 should include Scenario 1 activities.**

Institutions are encouraged to develop methods to monitor the level of COVID-19 activity among students, faculty, and staff.

All recommendations apply to both residential and nonresidential campuses, unless otherwise indicated.

Due to sizes of student bodies and campus communities, institutions may have different capacities to handle an increase in cases, thus implementation of these recommendations may vary from institution to institution. Additionally, not all recommended actions will be possible in all settings, and therefore should be tailored as appropriate.

**Vaccination uptake levels may influence mitigation decisions on campus.**

When deciding to shift into another scenario or when developing mitigation measures, campuses should consider levels of vaccination coverage on campus. Higher vaccination rates reduce transmission potential. Lower vaccination rates increase the chance of larger clusters and outbreaks on campus.

**Additional mitigation efforts for any scenario may be influenced by community transmission rates or local requirements.**

- Masking in public indoor settings is recommended by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and MDH, regardless of vaccination status when the surrounding county has substantial or high community transmission levels. Further, CDC recommends that in areas with high numbers of COVID-19 cases, masking should be considered in crowded outdoor settings and for activities with close contact with others who are not fully vaccinated. Refer to [CDC: Participate in Outdoor and Indoor Activities \(www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/outdoor-activities.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/outdoor-activities.html).
- In addition, local jurisdictions may establish their own requirements, so it is important to monitor developments in the jurisdiction where the institution is located.

#### **Additional resources**

- [CDC: Guidance for Implementing COVID-19 Prevention Strategies in the Context of Varying Community Transmission Levels and Vaccination Coverage \(www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7030e2.htm\)](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7030e2.htm)
- [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), find county-specific community transmission levels.
- [Recommendations for wearing Masks \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facecover.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facecover.html)
- [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), more guidance related to higher education institutions.

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## **Communicating transmission and mitigation levels**

IHEs are encouraged to communicate with their community (students and employees), local public health, and MDH when they are experiencing increasing numbers of COVID-19 cases and planning on changing mitigation efforts. Campuses may consider communicating what scenario (listed below) their transmission levels on campus reflect and what associated mitigation measures are in place. For technical assistance or questions, institutions can reach out to MDH at [Health.HigherEd.COVID19@state.mn.us](mailto:Health.HigherEd.COVID19@state.mn.us).

### **Reporting COVID-19**

#### **MDH requirements for reporting COVID-19**

COVID-19 is a reportable disease in Minnesota. Institutions of higher education are required to report cases and deaths to MDH per [Minnesota Rules, part 4605.7070 \(www.revisor.mn.gov/rules/4605.7070/\)](https://www.revisor.mn.gov/rules/4605.7070/). For more information on the communicable disease rule, visit [Minnesota Rules, chapter 4605 \(https://www.revisor.mn.gov/rules/4605/\)](https://www.revisor.mn.gov/rules/4605/).

## When to report

Report to the MDH IHE team when your institution is experiencing increases in cases of COVID-19. Increases are defined as either:

- The number of cases at the institution is 3% or more of the total number of on-campus students (i.e., students who are routinely on campus) over a 14-day period, OR
- The average percent positivity of tests performed by campus health services is 8% or more over a 14-day period, OR
- When there is an unusual cluster, an increase in disease severity (such as an increase in hospitalizations, etc.), or when extra support is needed around testing, vaccination, or other mitigation measures.

If any of these thresholds is met, report to MDH using the report form [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).

Further specifics on reporting for higher education can be found at [Guidance for Mitigating COVID-19 at Institutions of Higher Education \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/guideihe.pdf\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/guideihe.pdf).

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## Transmission level indicator decision points

This section provides a list of strategies to consider implementing, depending on the risk level of transmission on campus. Institutions of higher education can use these scenarios as they assess COVID-19 activity on campus and determine appropriate mitigation activities based on those transmission levels.

### Scenario 1: Indicators for low transmission levels (green)

**Transmission levels are manageable by the individual institution.**

- Cases of COVID-19 are able to be managed in a timely way by the COVID-19 coordinators.
- Isolation and quarantine rooms are less than 50% full.
- The surrounding county is at a low 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).

### Scenario 2: Indicators for medium transmission levels (yellow)

**Transmission levels are beginning to increase on campus.**

If **two or more** of the following indicators are met, strongly consider implementing mitigation efforts suggested in Scenario 2 action items.

- Cases reported among students who are routinely on campus comprise more than 1% of students over a 14-day period.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONDING TO DIFFERENT SCENARIOS OF COVID-19 TRANSMISSION AT INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

- Also, consider the setting where cases are being reported when using this indicator. For example, is it mostly confined to a specific group and able to be contained?
- “Routinely on campus” is defined as those living on campus or coming to campus for classes or activities.
- 50-75% of campus isolation and quarantine beds are full.
- Other internal metrics are showing signs of concern, for example, increased absenteeism due to COVID-19-like symptoms among faculty or staff.
- The surrounding county has reached a moderate 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).

### Scenario 3: Indicators for high transmission levels (orange)

#### Transmission levels have depleted institutional resources.

Increased case activity may be occurring on campus, in the community, or both. If **two or more** of the following indicators are met, strongly consider implementing mitigation efforts suggested in Scenario 3.

- Number of infections continue to increase for the two weeks after Scenario 2 mitigation efforts were put into place.
- Clusters of cases are not confined to one specific group; cases are increasing across the total campus population.
- The number of cases at the institution is 3% of the total number of on-campus students (i.e., students who are routinely on campus) over a 14-day period.
- The average percent positivity of tests performed by campus health services is 8% or more over a 14-day period.
  - This indicator is consistent with CDC’s definition of substantial or high transmission. Refer to page 13 of [HealthData.gov: COVID-19 Community Profile Report \(https://healthdata.gov/Health/COVID-19-Community-Profile-Report/gqxm-d9w9\)](https://healthdata.gov/Health/COVID-19-Community-Profile-Report/gqxm-d9w9).
- More than 75% of isolation and quarantine beds are full.
- The surrounding county has reached 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).

### Scenario 4: Sustained high transmission levels (red)

#### Transmission levels have seriously depleted or exhausted institutional resources.

The Scenario 3 mitigation efforts over a two- to three-week period have not resulted in an improvement, strongly consider implementing mitigation efforts suggested in Scenario 4.

## Action items in response to scenarios

### Scenario 1: Low level of transmission (green)

Follow guidance as outlined in Guidance for Mitigating COVID-19 at Institutions of Higher Education, found in the planning section at [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).

### Scenario 2: Medium level of transmission (yellow)

**All prior recommendations apply, with the following additional recommendations.**

#### General recommendations

- Consider hosting a vaccine clinic, or expanding existing clinics, especially if clusters are due to low vaccine coverage on campus.
- Promote importance of self-screening for symptoms of COVID-19.
- Reinforce health etiquette expectations (i.e., wash hands, cover cough, and stay home when sick).
  - [MDH: Cover Your Cough \(www.health.state.mn.us/people/cyc/index.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/cyc/index.html)
  - [MDH: If you have any of these symptoms, STOP! \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/materials/symptomsadd.pdf\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/materials/symptomsadd.pdf)
- Reach out to local public health and MDH for testing support, if needed.
- Review mask use practices and policies based on your campus operations and a careful review of cases, and consider expanding masking policies if necessary.

#### Academic programming

- Professors and instructors should be prepared to continue teaching students who are in quarantine or isolation via alternative learning to ensure academic continuity. Academic policies should accommodate these situations.

### Scenario 3: High level of transmission (orange)

**All prior recommendations apply, with these additions.**

**Please note, campuses reaching this level likely either have low vaccine coverage among students, faculty, and staff or are experiencing increased transmission due to a variant for which the vaccine is less effective.**

#### General considerations

- Extracurricular activities, clubs, and organizations should be scaled back significantly in terms of attendance and the frequency of meeting. These activities should be moved to virtual gatherings whenever possible, or consider postponing or canceling when virtual options are not feasible.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONDING TO DIFFERENT SCENARIOS OF COVID-19 TRANSMISSION AT INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

- Consider implementing social distancing practices of at least 6 feet between people wherever possible.
- Consider imposing a campus curfew if review of cases suggests a curfew would be a useful mitigation measure.
- Monitor and maintain proper inventories of critical supplies (e.g., cleaning and disinfectant agents, hand sanitizers, personal protective equipment supplies).
- If not already in place, strongly consider institution-level requirements on masks, according to MDH and CDC recommendations, especially in high traffic campus areas prone to crowding, such as dorms, and dining halls.

### Communication

- Ensure regular updates to people on campus about the status of case levels.
- Review plans to cease in-person classes if Scenario 4 actions must be activated.
- Plan social media outreach, monitoring, and response.

### Academic programming

- Consider moving classes to a hybrid format with online options or move to online-only for a period of time (two weeks, for example).
- Consider designating space with a reliable internet connection for students to join remote classes and ensure any designated spaces maintain social distancing and minimize the ability to gather.

### Residence life and dining

- Restrict outside access to dorms and residence halls.
- If possible, work with off-campus housing owners and staff to consider limits to visitation.
- Consider allowing some students to move home for remote-only learning.
- Consider reducing the number of students in a residential facility to one person per room.
- Consider offering more to-go meal options and limiting the number of people that can be in the dining facility at any one time.

### Student support services

- Consider how to support students who already experience racial, ethnic, or socio-economic disparities; COVID-19 is exacerbating those disparities.
- Allow for student involvement in designing or choosing the type of accommodation they need; be supportive of multiple forms of accommodation, as needs will vary. Examples may include anything from technological support to food security.

### Information technology

- Ensure access to loanable computers, including desktops, laptops, tablets, etc.
- Ensure remote access to computer labs, and check availability of Wi-Fi hot spots.

### **Athletics and recreational programs**

- Consider moving to individual-only development and exercise for athletes.
- Consider closing weight rooms.
- Consider reducing the number of spectators at events.

### **Campus operations and maintenance**

- Increase frequency of cleaning and disinfecting on campus.
- Consider modifying or limiting hours of operation (especially for areas where students tend to gather).
- Continue to monitor and enforce recommended MDH guidelines for social distancing.
- Ensure compliance and enforcement of the institution's policies and procedures.

### **Third-party use of facilities, events, and rentals**

- Consider canceling all third-party events and refund deposits, to the extent possible.

### **Plan for Scenario 4 if numbers do not decrease**

- Consider ways to further reduce the number of residents in residence halls.

## **Scenario 4: Sustained, high transmission levels (red)**

### **Transmission levels have exhausted institutional resources.**

Scenario 3 mitigation efforts over a two- to three-week period have not resulted in an improvement. Campus instruction and activities should move to online only, for at least a two-week period.

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## **Development of this document**

This document was created using the following resources and in collaboration with partners in higher education, including guidance from the MDH Institutions of Higher Education Surge Capacity Workgroup. Transmission risk level thresholds were created based on current MDH higher education and K-12 guidance, CDC guidance, MDH and IHE workgroups, and EAB (formerly the Education Advisory Board) threshold indicators:

- [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)
- [CDC: Guidance for Institutions of Higher Education \(IHEs\) \(www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html\)](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html)

## Resources

### General

- [CDC: Interim Guidance for Administrators of U.S. Institutions of Higher Education \(www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/guidance-administrators-college-higher-education.pdf\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/guidance-administrators-college-higher-education.pdf)
- [Minnesota COVID-19 Response: Who should get tested? \(mn.gov/covid19/get-tested/who-should-test/index.jsp\)](https://mn.gov/covid19/get-tested/who-should-test/index.jsp)
- [CDC: Caring for Someone Sick at Home \(www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/care-for-someone.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/care-for-someone.html)

### Signage

- [CDC: COVID-19 Print Resources \(www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/print-resources.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/print-resources.html)

### Campus recreation

- [NIRSA: Coronavirus Updates and Resources for Campus Recreation \(nirsa.net/nirsa/covid19/\)](https://nirsa.net/nirsa/covid19/)

### Housing

- [ACUHO-I: COVID-19 \(Novel Coronavirus\) Resources \(www.acuho-i.org/covid19\)](https://www.acuho-i.org/covid19)

### Mental health support

- [HEMHA College Counseling from a Distance: Deciding Whether and When to Engage in Telemental Health Services \(hemha.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/HEMHA-Distance-Counseling\\_FINAL2019.pdf\)](https://hemha.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/HEMHA-Distance-Counseling_FINAL2019.pdf)
- [SAMHSA: Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) \(www.samhsa.gov/coronavirus\)](https://www.samhsa.gov/coronavirus)
- [Mental Health America: Mental Health and COVID-19 Information and Resources \(mhanational.org/covid19#ForMentalHealthProviders\)](https://mhanational.org/covid19#ForMentalHealthProviders)



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