

School Sports Guidance: Return to Competition for Competitive Athletics and Activities in Maine

The Maine Principals' Association (MPA), drawing on the expertise of the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), the Maine Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (MIAAA), Maine Department of Education (MDOE), Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Maine Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED), and MPA Sports Medicine Advisory Committee (SMAC), offers this document as "School Sports Guidance" on how MPA member schools may consider approaching competitive athletics and activities in Maine for the 2020-2021 school year (currently the MPA individual sport considerations are just for fall sports). The MPA has sought and received approval from the Maine School Superintendents Association (MSSA) on this School Sports Guidance as well. While we all remain concerned about the dangers of COVID-19, we believe it is essential to the physical and mental well-being of high school students across the state that efforts be made to return to physical activity and athletic competition where that can occur in a reasonably safe environment.

The considerations outlined in this document are meant to decrease potential exposure of COVID-19 in sports and activities to a degree that competition, at both the community level and the school-based level, can occur when safe. The School Sports Guidance generally aligns with the General Guidance for Community Sports Activities that was updated by the State of Maine on September 1, 2020. The School Sport Guidance includes additional protections since these sports are taking place on school property and participants interact with other students and school staff who have not volunteered for these activities. Note that the Departments only reviewed the general guidance and not its sports-specific recommendations which the MPA has aligned with the general guidance.

As we continue to gain more information, this Guidance may be adjusted or even suspended to adapt to an ever-changing environment.

The Maine Principals' Association, along with the Maine School Superintendents Association, the Maine Athletic Administrators Association, and State officials, are committed to maximizing the athletic opportunities for student-athletes across Maine and will remain flexible in considering that certain sports may be impacted differently, and post-season play may need to be modified.

Based on currently known information, the MPA Sports Medicine Advisory Committee believes that STRICT ADHERENCE by schools and teams to these guidelines, and to each district's COVID-19 prevention plan, should provide a reasonably safe environment for return to educational programming and school-based athletics and community-based athletics. It is important to remember that all sports and activities carry a potential risk of injury and illness. The risk of contracting COVID-19 illness is in addition to the underlying risks of a given sport or activity. It is also important to note that participation in any competitive sport and/or activity is strictly voluntary for both the individuals and the schools.

Reducing exposure to respiratory droplets through physical distancing and face coverings, as well as increased hand hygiene and avoidance of shared and common touch items, remain the primary tools to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Because of the increased possibility of infection through droplets, vigorous exercise in closely confined spaces should be avoided.

Sports and activities present multiple challenges in the effective use of primary prevention strategies. These challenges include:

- Risk of exposure to the virus due to close physical proximity during sports and activities through participation in the sport activity itself, group seating, and group travel.
- Increased risk during intense and sustained physical contact whether purposeful or accidental.
- Increased projection of respiratory particles during cardiovascular activities, yelling or shouting as part of play, or common sneezing or coughing. This increase in projection of droplets can be up to 14 feet. Face coverings are an effective tool to reduce the risk of viral transmission between individuals.

Relationship to School District Plans

Maine's Framework for Reopening Schools and Returning to In-Person Instruction (*Framework*) directs school administrative units to develop plans that meet Maine Department of Education requirements for public health safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. The *Framework* also includes recommendations for districts to consider in developing their plans. School district-specific plans apply to school sports as well as other extra-curricular activities. This includes but is not limited to the requirement for all adults and children age five and above to wear a mask / face covering. The only exceptions to the mask requirement are for students with documented medical or behavioral challenges, adults who have medical reasons for being unable to wear face coverings, and during vigorous physical exercise. Face coverings are required at all times except for the limited instances in which exercise is vigorous and increases the work of breathing, making wearing a face covering intolerable. This requirement includes but is not limited to sports that involve moderate intensity exercise or at times when exercising is not intense, while seated on the bench, during stretching and warmups, during pre-and post-game activities (e.g., coin toss, meeting with officials, interviews, celebrations), during coaching strategy sessions, and when entering and leaving the playing area. The mask is most effective when it remains dry and unsoiled.

Adoption of the School Sports Guidance, like other State-developed or recognized guidance, is voluntary and a pre-condition for any school sports to take place. If a school district cannot feasibly implement and enforce the Guidance, it should not allow sports in its schools. Each school district should also align school sports with other elements of its plan. For example, a school district's limits on the number of people in school facilities for in-person instruction should apply to school sports as well. And, the school district's rules for transportation and the use of spaces like locker rooms should apply to school sports. Since each school district plan is different, the school administrative unit will adjust this Guidance as necessary for its own set of school sports.

The Maine DHHS and Maine CDC have developed a Health Advisory System to categorize counties for school district's use. "Green" suggests that the county has a relatively low risk of COVID-19 spread and that schools may consider in-person instruction, if they can meet each of the minimum health and safety requirements. "Yellow" suggests that a county has an elevated risk of COVID-19 spread, so schools may consider additional precautions to reduce the number of people in classrooms at any one time and decrease interactions and risk. This includes school sports: given the somewhat greater risk of sports than in-person education, school districts should suspend competitions and group practices, and apply the same or greater reductions in school sport activities that it applies to in-person education. "Red" suggests a county has a high risk of COVID-19 spread and that in-person instruction and all school sports are inadvisable. The county-level color designations are advisory for school administrators. Those administrators may consider local conditions and make their own decisions.

Framework for Assessing the Risk of Sports and Recreation Activities

The risk of participating in sports and recreation activities is determined by a combination of (1) risk of transmission of COVID-19 inherent to each sport in terms of duration and proximity of contact (e.g. golf versus rugby) and (2) risk associated with the type of play (e.g. skill-building drills, within-team competition, competition between teams from different geographic areas).

Type of Play

The following types of play are defined by level from least to greatest risk. Across all types of play, keep players together in small, stable groups (i.e. cohorts) with dedicated coaches or staff. Ideally, these cohorts should include fewer than 30 individuals.

- Level 1: Performing skill-building drills or conditioning at home, alone or with household members
- Level 2: Team-based practice with physically distanced group activities
- Level 3: Within-team competition (e.g. intra-squad scrimmages). This level of play involves one cohort of participants.
- Level 4: Competition between teams from the same geographic area (e.g. the same county and in some cases adjacent counties). This level of play involves two cohorts of participants.
- Level 5: Competition between teams from different geographic areas within Maine
- Level 6: Competition between teams from different states

Note: Individuals traveling or returning to Maine must follow the executive order on travel and rules explained in the [Keep Maine Healthy](#) plan. This includes a requirement that all out-of-state travelers coming into Maine, as well as Maine residents returning to Maine, complete a 14-day quarantine upon arrival or have a negative COVID-19 PCR test no longer than 72 hours of arrival with quarantine while waiting for the result (unless that travel is to or from an exempted state). Check the [website of the Maine Centers for Disease Control](#) for updated information on exemptions to this requirement. Please note that competition between teams from different states is not recommended at this time.

Type of play allowed, based on risk level of sport or activity

At this time, sports are restricted to the types of play presented in the table below based on the level of risk associated with the sport or activity. During all activities, the public health measures in this guidance must be followed (e.g., hand hygiene, cleaning and disinfecting, face coverings, etc.) These recommendations will be updated as conditions change.

Risk level characteristics	Examples	Levels of Play Allowed
Lower Risk		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sports and activities that can be done with physical distancing and no physical contact • Sports and activities that can be done individually 	<p><i>Examples:</i> Batting cages, tennis, pickleball, individual swimming, catch, disc golf, golf, individual biking, surfing, horseback riding, crew/sailing, fishing, hunting, motor sports, gymnastics, weightlifting, single sculling, throwing events (javelin, shot put, discus, hammer), jumping events (high jump, pole vault, long jump, triple jump), skiing, cross country events where physical distance can be maintained</p>	<p>Levels 1-5 (indoor or outdoor)</p>
Moderate Risk		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sports and activities that involve intermittent close proximity or limited, incidental contact, but with protective equipment or mitigating measures in place that may reduce the likelihood of respiratory particle transmission between participants (e.g., wearing masks, modifying play to maintain 6 feet of physical distance, cleaning and disinfecting) 	<p><i>Examples:</i> Baseball, softball, team swimming, fencing, soccer, basketball, lacrosse, ice hockey, competitive and sideline cheer, martial arts, ultimate frisbee, running events where physical distance cannot be maintained, field hockey, pair figure skating, volleyball, 7 vs. 7 flag (touch) football</p>	<p>Levels 1-3 (indoor or outdoor)</p> <p>Level 4 (outdoor only)</p>
Higher Risk		

Risk level characteristics	Examples	Levels of Play Allowed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sports and activities that involve sustained close contact between participants, lack of significant protective barriers, and high probability that respiratory particles will be transmitted between participants 	<p><i>Examples:</i> Football, wrestling, rugby, boxing</p>	<p>Levels 1-3 (indoor or outdoor; outdoor recommended)</p>

High-Risk Populations

- Vulnerable or high-risk populations require special consideration for sporting activities.
- Individuals should discuss the risk of COVID-19 with their primary care provider to determine if sports activities are a safe option for them or their child, with consideration for individuals at higher risk with whom they or a member of their household group may be living or interacting with.
- The following populations are at higher risk. Higher risk should be considered regarding participation in sporting activities as a player or a coach (and in some settings, as a spectator):
 - People 65 or older
 - People who live in a nursing home or long-term care facility
 - People of all ages with underlying medical conditions, particularly if not well controlled including:
 - People with chronic lung disease or moderate to severe asthma
 - People who have serious heart conditions
 - People who are immunocompromised: Many conditions can cause a person to be immunocompromised, including cancer treatment, smoking, bone marrow or organ transplantation, immune deficiencies, poorly controlled HIV or AIDS, and prolonged use of corticosteroids and other immune weakening medications
 - People with severe obesity (body mass index [BMI] of 40 or higher)
 - People with diabetes
 - People with chronic kidney disease undergoing dialysis
 - People with liver disease
- Consider offering options for individuals at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19, such as virtual coaching and in-home drills that limit their exposure risk.

General Guidance

1. Organizers of competitive sports and activities are responsible for limiting the number of individuals that can gather in a shared space, in accordance with the [Governor's Executive Order](#) on gathering size limits, currently set at 50 people indoors and 100 people outdoors or fewer if distancing rules cannot be accommodated.
 - a. Players, coaches, volunteers, officials, and spectators count toward the gathering limit.
 - b. If a space cannot accommodate the gathering limit without complying with the six-foot distancing requirement, occupancy in that space must be limited to allow for such compliance.
2. Require individuals to wear a face covering when physical distancing is difficult to maintain, per CDC recommendations and pertinent Executive Orders from the Office of the Governor.
 - a. Face coverings are not currently recommended for players during active practice or competition, although athletes may wear face coverings during vigorous activity if they chose to do so. Face coverings must be used when not engaged in vigorous activity (e.g. during low to moderate intensity exercise, during coaching strategy sessions, in bench area).
 - b. Unless the governing body for your sport has a specific recommendation regarding plastic face shields, do not wear them in place of a face covering given potential safety risks.
 - c. Face coverings must be worn by coaches, staff, officials, and spectators.
 - d. To facilitate the use of a face covering, coaches and officials must use an artificial noisemaker such as an air horn in place of a whistle or keep the whistle inside the face covering.
3. Require individuals to maintain 6 feet of physical distance from individuals who are not part of their household group whenever possible.
 - a. Organizers should identify staff members or volunteers to help maintain physical distancing among players, coaches, umpires/referees, and spectators.
 - b. Space players at least 6 feet apart whenever possible (e.g., during warmup, skill building activities, simulation drills, when explaining drills or the rules of the game).
 - c. Spectators must maintain 6 feet of physical distance between themselves and other spectators as well as players. Prohibiting cheering and yelling is recommended. Clapping, ringing cowbells, and other activities that do not involve the projection of respiratory droplets are low-risk alternatives.
 - d. Discourage unnecessary physical contact, such as high fives, handshakes, fist bumps, or hugs

Communicating COVID-19 Policies

1. Inform participants and spectators of the district COVID-19 policies and procedures in advance, if possible, via website, newsletters, social media channels, etc.
 - a. Coaches are encouraged to send a welcome email or call players and/or parents to inform them about actions that the program will take to protect

players. During these calls, coaches should remind them to stay home if they are sick or have been around someone who is sick.

2. Place signage at entrances and throughout the venue alerting individuals to required gathering limits, physical distancing requirements, face covering policies, symptoms of COVID-19, and other health and hygiene reminders. The federal CDC has developed free, printable posters on these topics (see: [Print Resources](#); For communications resources specific to sporting activities see: [Considerations for Youth Sports](#)).
3. It is strongly recommended that program organizers and coaches remind players, spectators, and staff that if they are ill (e.g. have a fever or cough) they must not visit, train, or play. Signage reminding individuals of the signs and symptoms of COVID-19 is highly recommended.
4. Consider using announcements and/or recorded messages to communicate COVID-19 policies to individuals during their time at the venue, if applicable.

Operational Considerations (In Addition to School District-Specific Policies)

1. Risk of virus transmission decreases in outside environments. Indoor sports activities significantly increase exposure to respiratory droplets in the shared air space. Prioritize outdoor, as opposed to indoor, practice and play as much as possible. Vigorous exercise amongst team members from different households in closely confined spaces should be avoided, even if masked and physically distanced. Practice for higher risk sports that occur outside will be cancelled in the event of inclement weather rather than shifted to indoors.
2. Provide training to coaches, officials, and staff on:
 - a. hand hygiene
 - b. physical distancing guidelines and expectations
 - c. monitoring personal health
 - d. proper wear, removal, and disposal of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
 - e. laundering of face coverings and uniforms: [Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility, How to Disinfect: Laundry \(CDC\)](#)
 - f. cleaning protocols, including how to safely and effectively use cleaning supplies: [Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting Public Spaces, Workplaces, Businesses, Schools and Homes](#) (CDC)
 - g. All coaches of fall sports are required, and officials, staff, and athletes, are strongly recommended to take the NFHS course on COVID-19 for Coaches and Administrators: <https://nfhslearn.com/courses/covid-19-for-coaches-and-administrators>
3. Conduct training virtually or ensure that physical distancing is maintained during training.
4. Youth activities require adult supervision to ensure careful attention to mitigation strategies.
5. Coaches, volunteers, and athletes must stay home if they are feeling ill or have any symptoms of COVID-19. Organizers/coaches should ask all staff and players (or guardians of players, if appropriate) to self-screen for COVID-19 symptoms prior to practice or competition using either of the following approaches:
 - a. Use an electronic or app-based self-screening form, such as the Coronavirus Self-Checker available on the [federal CDC's homepage](#).

- b. Self-screen using the following questions:
 1. Do you feel ill or have you been caring for someone who is ill?
 2. In the past two weeks, have you been exposed to anyone who tested positive for COVID-19?
6. Promote frequent handwashing or hand sanitizing with all participants engaged in sports activities. If soap and water are not readily available, use hand sanitizers with a minimum of 60% alcohol content. Handwashing and/or sanitizing should occur before and after the sport activities, and more often if the activity involves the use of shared objects.
 - a. Providing a method to rinse hands before applying hand sanitizer is recommended for situations where participants may become dirty or dusty.
 - b. Encourage visitors to be prepared to bring their own hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol for use in facilities where soap and water are not readily available.
7. Educate players about covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue or their elbow. Discourage spitting.
8. For contact tracing purposes, to the extent practicable, organizers should maintain a record including contact information for athletes and coaches who have direct prolonged interaction.
 - a. Based on current knowledge, a close contact is someone who was within 6 feet of an infected person for at least 15 minutes starting from 48 hours before illness onset until the time the patient is isolated. Close contacts should stay home, maintain physical distancing, and self-monitor until 14 days from the last date of exposure.
9. Follow the Maine CDC recommendations for reporting when a person involved in school sports is confirmed positive for COVID-19 or a close contact of such a person (see the Standard Operating Procedure for Investigation of COVID-19 in Pre-K-12 Schools in Maine is posted on the Department of Education website).
10. Encourage players to wait in their cars until just before the beginning of a practice, warm-up, or game, instead of forming a group.
11. If practice or competition facilities must be shared, consider increasing the amount of time between practices and competitions to allow for one group to leave before another group enters the facility/venue. This will minimize interaction between individuals at points of ingress and egress and allow time for cleaning and disinfecting.
12. Prohibit activities and events such as off-site competitions or excursions (e.g., watching a professional team compete).
13. Limit the number of players sitting in confined player seating areas (e.g., dugouts). Ensure 6 feet of physical distance by allowing players to spread out into spectator areas if more space is available.
14. Provide physical guides, such as signs and tape on floors or playing fields, to make sure that coaches and players remain at least 6 feet apart.

Facilities (In Addition to School District-Specific Policies)

1. Indoor sports activities significantly increase exposure to respiratory droplets in the shared air space. If indoor facilities are used, take steps to improve ventilation in the building.

- a. Increase the percentage of outdoor air (e.g., using economizer modes of HVAC operations) potentially as high as 100% (first verify compatibility with HVAC system capabilities for both temperature and humidity control as well as compatibility with outdoor/indoor air quality considerations).
 - b. Increase total airflow supply to occupied spaces, if possible.
 - c. Disable demand-control ventilation (DCV) controls that reduce air supply based on temperature or occupancy.
 - d. Consider using natural ventilation (i.e., opening windows if possible and safe to do so) to increase outdoor air dilution of indoor air when environmental conditions and building requirements allow.
2. Take steps to ensure that all water systems and features (for example, drinking fountains) are safe to use after a prolonged facility shutdown to minimize the risk of disease. Further guidance is available from the CDC (see: [Guidance for Reopening Buildings After Prolonged Shutdown or Reduced Operation](#)).
 3. Consider restricting the use of water fountains to water bottle refill only with instruction for individuals to wash or sanitize hands after use.
 4. Require any organizations that share or use the sports facilities to follow the considerations in this guidance.

Cleaning and Disinfection (In Addition to School District-Specific Policies)

1. Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces on the field, court, or play surface at least daily, or between uses as much as possible. Use of shared objects and equipment (e.g., balls, bats, gymnastics equipment) should be limited and objects should be cleaned between uses if possible.
2. Identify a staff member or volunteer to ensure proper cleaning and disinfection of objects and equipment, particularly for any shared equipment or frequently touched surfaces.
3. Cleaning products should not be used near children, and staff should ensure that there is adequate ventilation when using these products to prevent children or themselves from inhaling toxic fumes.
4. Use gloves when removing garbage bags or handling and disposing of trash. [Wash hands after removing gloves](#).
5. Refer to the following documents for guidance on general cleaning and disinfection:
 - a. [COVID-19 Prevention Checklist General Guidance](#) (State of Maine)
 - b. [Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility](#) (CDC)
 - c. [Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting Public Spaces, Workplaces, Businesses, Schools and Homes](#) (CDC)

Shared Objects (In Addition to School District-Specific Policies)

1. Participants should bring and use their own equipment when possible, or have equipment designated and labeled for individual use by the organization.
2. Discourage sharing of items, especially those that are difficult to clean, sanitize, or disinfect. Do not let players share towels, clothing (e.g. uniforms, pinnies), or other items they use to wipe their faces or hands.
3. Make sure there are adequate supplies of shared items to minimize sharing of equipment to the extent possible (e.g., protective gear, balls, bats, water bottles);

otherwise, limit use of supplies and equipment to one group of players at a time and clean and disinfect between use.

4. Keep each player's belongings separated from others' and in individually labeled containers, bags, or areas.
5. If food is offered at any event, have pre-packaged boxes or bags for each attendee instead of a buffet or family-style meal. Avoid sharing food and utensils.
6. Water bottles should be labeled to avoid cross-contamination.

Cohorting Players and Coaches

1. Keep players together in small, stable groups with dedicated coaches or staff, and make sure that each group of players and coach avoid mixing with other groups as much as possible.
2. Teams might consider having the same group of players stay with the same coach or having the same group of players rotate among coaches.
3. Consider staging within-team scrimmages instead of playing games with other teams to minimize exposure among players and teams.

Transportation (In Addition to School District-Specific Policies)

1. Transportation to and from sports activities require attention because of increased risk of proximity and poor ventilation. All state and district guidelines regarding transportation must always be followed.
2. Limit the use of carpools or van pools. When riding in a vehicle to a sports event, encourage players to ride with persons living in their same household. Carpooling with individuals from different households is not recommended.
3. If carpooling with individuals outside one's household group is necessary, increase ventilation in the vehicle, and all riders must wear a facial covering, and use hand sanitizer.
4. If buses are used, spread individuals out to the extent possible, increase the airflow with open windows if weather permits, require use of face coverings, use hand sanitizer upon entering and exiting the bus, and follow the same rules for buses that are used for transportation for in-person instruction in the school district.

References:

Maine Department of Economic and Community Development – Phase 2 Community Sports
<https://www.maine.gov/decd/checklists/community-sports>

The National Federation of State High School Associations – Guidance for Opening Up High School Athletics and Activities https://www.nfhs.org/media/3812287/2020-nfhs-guidance-for-opening-up-high-school-athletics-and-activities-nfhs-smac-may-15_2020-final.pdf

US CDC Youth Sports Guidance: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/youth-sports.html>

US CDC Face Covering Guidance: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover-guidance.html>

World Health Organization Guidance on Children and Masks: <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-children-and-masks-related-to-covid-19>

Appendix – Return to Play Guidelines

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