



**ONONDAGA COUNTY  
HEALTH DEPARTMENT**

# **Health Advisory: Higher Risk K-12 School Sports**

January 28, 2021

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County Executive



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TO: Public School Superintendents, Private School Leaders, School Medical Directors,  
and School Athletic Directors

FROM: Onondaga County Health Department

DATE: January 28, 2021

## SUMMARY

- New York State’s Interim Guidance For Sports And Recreation During The COVID-19 Public Health Emergency categorizes sports and recreation activities as lower risk, moderate risk, and higher risk. Wrestling, ice hockey, basketball, contact lacrosse, rugby, competitive cheerleading/group dance and volleyball are among the sports categorized as higher risk.
- On January 22, 2021, Governor Cuomo announced that effective February 1, 2021, participants in higher risk sports and recreation activities may partake in individual or distanced group training and organized no/low-contact group training and may partake in other types of play, including competitions and tournaments, only as permitted by their local health departments.
  - The Interim Guidance For Sports And Recreation During The COVID-19 Public Health Emergency stipulates that the following factors should be considered regarding higher risk sports, which may weigh against permitting such activities:
    - Whether a more-transmissible variant of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19 disease) has been identified by New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) in the area.
      - NYSDOH’s Wadsworth Center performs SARS-CoV-2 sequencing to detect such virus variant. In general, SARS-CoV-2 sequencing is not performed by hospital or commercial laboratories.
    - Local rates of SARS-CoV-2 transmission or rate of positivity:
      - This includes consideration of Onondaga County and the CNY region.
      - The Department of Biostatistics at the Harvard Chan School of Public Health publishes county-level Rt estimates based on publicly available NYSDOH data.
    - Increase in hospital admissions.
- Effective February 1, 2021, and until otherwise indicated, student-athletes are permitted to participate in organized recreational league or K-12 sponsored higher-risk school sports in Onondaga County, provided that specific requirements are met.
- Seven day rolling average of infection rate at 8% or higher: should not have any sports activities until infection rate declines. <https://forward.ny.gov/early-warning-monitoring-dashboard>
- Recent MMWR publication dated Jan 26, 2021 warns of high transmission of SARS COV2 virus during high contact sports of wrestling and is of significant concern. Report concludes, “outbreak among athletes can impact in person learning for all students and can increase risk for secondary in school and community transmission with potentially severe outcomes including death.” <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7004e4.htm> Therefore a decision to participate in wrestling sports including practice and competition should be carefully weighed against the backdrop of rates of infection in Onondaga County and contiguous counties and decided by the school leadership.
- Onondaga County Health Department reserves right to pull back if Onondaga County or a contiguous county has a spike in the infection rate.

## BACKGROUND

The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Regarding SARS-CoV-2 and participation in sports, the American Academy of Pediatrics has indicated that re-engaging in sports activities has physical and psychological health benefits. Participating in sports allows youth to improve their cardiovascular health, strength, body composition, and overall fitness. Mentally, youth may experience benefits from increased socialization and from a more structured routine. Both the psychological and physical benefits support developmental growth and can have immune system benefits.

The State’s decision to permit higher-risk sports and recreation activities does not mean that their risk has changed. Any time people are gathered, there is a risk of exposure to SARS-CoV-2, which can lead to serious medical conditions and even death. Symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals can spread the virus. Masking, distancing, and other mitigation measures reduce, but do not eliminate risk. Further, there is a significant risk of transmission to those in the home of an infected student-athlete.

At present, it cannot be predicted who will become severely ill, although older people and those with underlying health conditions are at higher risk. The long-term effects of SARS-CoV-2 are not known; even people with mild cases may experience long-term complications.

Schools, players, parents, and coaches should understand that social interactions outside of an actual practice or competition (e.g. locker rooms, buses) are also potential places of transmission among student-athletes. Regarding clusters of SARS-CoV-2 cases among athletes, at this time, there is insufficient data to determine whether transmission is more likely to have occurred because of the nature of a given sport or because of the social factors and environment surrounding the athletes and teams.

Ultimately, the decision falls on a parents/guardian to decide whether they will allow their children to participate in a given sport or activity.

## REQUIREMENTS FOR HIGHER RISK K-12 SCHOOL SPORTS IN ONONDAGA COUNTY

Effective February 1, 2021, and until otherwise indicated, student-athletes are permitted to participate in organized recreational league or K-12 sponsored higher-risk school sports in Onondaga County, provided that the following requirements are met.

- Each school district’s Board of Education or non-public school’s Board of Directors (or other appropriate person/entity for recreational leagues) must approve the district/school’s participation in each specific higher-risk sport.
- Each school superintendent/school leader, or appropriate person/entity for recreational leagues, must oversee the creation of a sport-specific preparedness plan that delineates:
  - A plan administrator, who is responsible for communicating the plan to -athletes, coaches, parents, trainers, referees/officials, etc.
  - A plan coordinator, who will serve as a point of contact, should any cases be identified. The coordinator must facilitate and assist with case investigation and contact elicitation and notification.
  - A daily system to ensure that no one associated with the practice or competition is ill, including referees/officials and spectators.

- A system for logging attendance by all individuals associated with the practice or competition, including referees/officials and spectators. The system must capture names, phone numbers and email addresses.
- How practice and game times can be staggered to avoid crowding and congestion when participants, referees/officials and spectators are arriving, playing, and leaving.
- If feasible, how pods can be created to limit the potential for transmission in the event of an exposure. A pod is a group of athletes who only practice or play with members of their own pod.
  - Pods should either practice in physically separate rooms, facilities or areas or steps taken to ensure that pods are appropriately distanced.
  - Teams should avoid reassigning athletes to different pods to the maximum extent possible.
  - The smaller the pod size, the more the team can minimize potential transmission.
- Sharing of objects (e.g. water bottles, towels, snacks) will be avoided and the use of dedicated personal equipment encouraged.
- If feasible, how practices or competitions can be held outdoors. If not feasible, how time spent indoors can be minimized.
- Use of locker rooms and facility shower is strongly discouraged to avoid a place for transmission of the virus.
- Carpooling should be discouraged to the extent possible.
- If traveling by buses, strongly advise to conform to social distancing requirements for buses per state school transportation requirements; for recreational leagues, use of buses should also conform to NYS guidance for social distancing bus transportation requirements for schools.
- For games requiring overnight travel, sharing of hotel room is strongly discouraged, to the extent possible.
- Minimize congregate dining and when it is necessary, apply NYS social distancing regulations related to dining and gatherings should be adhered to.
- Each sport-specific preparedness plan must be approved by the district/school's medical director. It is recommended that recreational leagues base sports-specific preparedness plans on district/school approved plans.
- Each school should adopt a policy to have a parent/guardian sign a district/school- developed SARS-CoV-2 informed consent that, at a minimum, acknowledges that:
  - Participation in the higher-risk sport places the student-athlete at risk of exposure to SARS-CoV-2.
  - Symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals can spread the virus.
  - Masking, distancing, and other mitigation measures reduce, but do not eliminate risk.
  - At present, it cannot be predicted who will become severely ill if infected.
  - SARS-CoV-2 can lead to serious medical conditions and death for people of all ages.
  - The long-term effects of SARS-CoV-2 are, at present, unknown; even people with mild cases may experience long-term complications.
  - There is a significant risk of transmission to those in the home of infected student-athletes.
  - Older people and people with underlying health conditions are at higher risk of serious disease.
  - This acknowledgement shall include consent that a condition of ongoing participation will be full cooperation with case/ contact investigations and compliance with isolation/quarantine requests if indicated.
- Each district/school obtains a medical clearance from the student-athletes healthcare provider
- If an athlete or coach has a positive COVID-19 diagnostic test, all in-person team or group activities (e.g., practices, scrimmages, games, meetings) will be cancelled for a 10-day period.
- Each team is responsible for screening all athletes and coaches for COVID-19 symptoms for every team event, including practice, scrimmage, or tournaments. Individuals who were exposed to a COVID-19 case or diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 10 days are not allowed to participate in the sport or join spectators.
- Spectators are limited to two per player. In addition, indoor sports facilities are limited to allow 50% of capacity into their facility.

- COVID-19 vaccination status does not alter regulation requirement
- Each district/school establishes and disseminates their own dedicated phone number and email address to allow athletes, parents or others to report alleged failures to adhere to the obligations reflected in these requirements and/or those in NYS' Interim Guidance For Sports and Recreation During The COVID-19 Public Health Emergency.
- Masks that conform to recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention must be worn at all times, by all student-athletes, coaches, managers, referees/officials, spectators, individuals dropping off or picking up student-athletes, etc. If student-athletes are unable to wear a mask because of difficulty breathing during high intensity activities or swimming, they must wear all times when not actively playing, including when on bench or pool deck.
  - Any mask that becomes saturated with sweat must be changed immediately.
  - Reusable masks (cloth face coverings) must be washed daily in hot water and not reused until cleaned.
  - Coaches, managers, and other school employees should monitor proper use and correct improper use by student-athletes, when indicated.
- Onondaga County Health Department recommends that each student-athlete, coach, manager, referee/official, or other individual associated with the higher-risk sport must undergo weekly, PCR-based SARS-CoV-2 testing, unless the individual has documentation of a positive PCR-based SARS-CoV-2 test within the previous 90 days. Rapid tests such as an Antigen test, is an acceptable substitute for testing asymptomatic individuals. Anyone who is symptomatic or has had history of recent exposure to a case should get molecular (PCR) testing.
  - Testing must be arranged or conducted by the district/school. County will assist in this effort, under health department's article 28, for such testing including uploading of data in NYSDOH's lab reporting system ECLRS
  - The district/school must report patient-specific results (positive or negative) to the Onondaga County Health Department
  - The 'home' team is responsible for arranging for and reporting of results from officials/referees.
- Travel for practice or play to or from anywhere other than contiguous counties within Section III is not permitted.
  - Travel to, or from, any area that has been designated as a red or orange zone is not permitted.
  - Travel to, or from, any area that has been designated as a yellow zone is permitted, so long as it adheres to all applicable NYS guidance.
  - Superintendents/school leaders from districts/schools from outside Onondaga County must stipulate to the host district/school that no one associated with the team is known to be ill or currently infected with SARS-CoV-2 prior to their team traveling to Onondaga County to participate in a practice or competition.
  - Travel to/from interstate competitions is not recommended and travel to/from states with positivity rates that meet or exceed NYS orange and red zone micro-cluster rates is prohibited.
- Districts/school or recreational leagues must limit spectators to minimize the risk of transmission and comply with venue guidance and capacity limits. No more than two spectators per student-athlete may be permitted for indoor sports.
- Each district/school or recreational league will maintain at their own expense a valid policy of insurance covering the liability arising from their sponsorship of higher-risk sports teams.
- Each district/school or recreational league agrees to indemnify and hold harmless the County, its directors, officers, employees and agents from and against any and all claims, actions or liabilities of any nature that may be asserted against them by third parties in connection with participation in higher-risk school sports.