

COVID-19 Response in Recreational Athletic Programs

What is Fairfax County Health Department’s approach to COVID investigations in athletic programs*?

Supporting guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Virginia Department of Health (VDH), Fairfax County Health Department (FCHD) prioritizes the return of students to in-person learning, which may require changes to activities, such as youth athletics, to improve the opportunity for students to safely return to schools. While the benefits of youth athletics include exercise, peer competition, and socialization, it continues to pose a significant risk for COVID-19 transmission even when mitigation efforts are followed. COVID-19 is transmitted through close contact and through the breathing in of infected respiratory droplets, which are present in greater quantity and spread farther during physical activity or exertion.

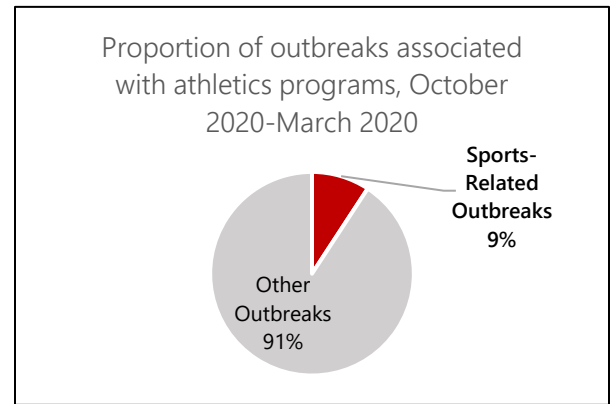
Given the recent significant increase in the number of COVID-19 cases associated with youth athletics along with evidence of transmission occurring among teams, FCHD has established a process for pausing activities and quarantining exposed team players. **In the event of a positive COVID-19 case in an athlete, the entire team should be paused from practice and games for 24-72 hours to allow time for FCHD to [complete their investigation of the case and provide guidance](#).** Those who practiced with or competed against the infectious individual and met the [exposure criteria](#) must quarantine for 14 days past the last date of exposure. **Following VDH guidance and given the high-risk setting (see high risk section on next page), the exposure criteria may be defined by direct exposure to respiratory secretions in athletics with short and intense physical interactions (such as wrestling).** These measures are necessary to help slow the spread of COVID-19 among teammates, their families, and the community. The Health Department strongly encourages the use of all public health mitigation efforts to stop COVID-19, including the wearing of face masks consistently and appropriately, practicing physical distancing, and prohibiting sick athletes from attending or participating in athletic events.

Sport	Team Guidance	Quarantine Guidance		Competition Guidance
Sports with direct physical contact between teammates and/or competitors (unable to maintain 6ft social distancing at all times)	All in-person team activities (practice, group workouts, competitions, etc.) are paused while FCHD’s investigation is occurring.	Single COVID-19 case on team:	Quarantine teammates based on FCHD contact investigation.	Notification to be made to competing team(s). Based on investigation, competing players may be quarantined.
		Outbreak on team (2+ linked cases):	All team activities cancelled for 14 days from the last date of exposure. Quarantine teammates based on FCHD contact investigation.	
Sports with no physical contact between teammates and/or competitors (able to maintain 6ft social distancing at all times)	All in-person team activities (practice, group workouts, competitions, etc.) are paused while FCHD’s investigation is occurring.	Single COVID-19 case on team:	Quarantine teammates based on FCHD contact investigation.	No public health actions required.
		Outbreak on team (2+ linked cases):	All team activities cancelled for 14 days from the last date of exposure. Quarantine teammates based on FCHD contact investigation.	



How has COVID-19 impacted youth athletic programs so far?

- Over the past six months, FCHD investigated **125 COVID-19 cases and 24 outbreaks in youth athletics groups**. These outbreaks have constituted almost 10% of all outbreaks in that timeframe (see chart). Sports with outbreaks investigated by FCHD include basketball, dance, football, gymnastics, hockey, martial arts, and wrestling. The outbreaks averaged five cases and 14 contacts per outbreak. The higher number of participants and close contacts in sports settings may contribute to this increase in affected individuals.



Why are athletes at higher risk for spreading COVID-19?

- There are a few factors that contribute to increased risk of transmission among athletes. First, the **physical proximity** in many competitive sports, and potential for **shared game equipment**, increases the risk of spreading respiratory droplets between players. As this is the primary way that COVID-19 is spread, it puts athletes at a higher risk of passing along the disease. Second, the **cumulative length of time** participants spend in proximity with each other increases the amount of time respiratory transmission can occur. Higher-intensity physical activity that can lead to **heavier breathing** may also increase the likelihood of transmission. Finally, indoor settings may not disperse respiratory droplets as well as being outdoors, which enables the COVID-19 virus to spread more easily among participants. While outdoor sports may have a lower risk of transmission, public health uses the same definition of exposure for both indoor and outdoor settings.^{1, 2}

Why is the quarantine guideline 14-days long?

- The Fairfax County Health Department has a team of public health experts who conduct investigations of cases in sports programs and determine the appropriate action to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Quarantine of close contacts for 14 days is one mitigation measure that is proven effective in preventing the spread. FCHD takes into consideration the setting of exposure, the features of the sport and interactions amongst players, and other factors when determining if another player meets the definition of close contact.
- FCHD follows a 14-day quarantine timeframe for close contacts of COVID cases. This is because the period in which someone will develop COVID-19 after being exposed to it most often occurs between 1-14 days. While CDC recommends a full 14-day quarantine, they have provided guidance for shortened quarantine that depends on a defined set of circumstances and resources. Allowing for shortened quarantine, particularly in an athletic setting with higher likelihood of transmission, increases the risk of additional cases. Also, CDC has asserted the decision of quarantine timeframes should be left up to local health departments; FCHD, with the support of VDH, has chosen the safest approach for quarantine guidelines.

Additional Resources

- [VDH: Considerations for Recreational Sports](#)
- [CDC: Considerations for Youth Sports Administrators](#)
- [CDC: Sports Program FAQs](#)
- [CDC: Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools through Phased Mitigation](#)

***- Please note that while this document emphasizes youth athletics, the processes and recommendations described in this document also apply to adult recreational sports teams/leagues in the Fairfax Health District.**

¹ Helgeson, S. A., Lee, A. S., Patel, N. M., Taylor, B. J., Lim, K. G., & Niven, A. S. (2020). Cardiopulmonary Exercise and the Risk of Aerosol Generation While Wearing a Surgical Mask. *Chest*, S0012-3692(20)34508-6. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chest.2020.09.088>

² Riediker, M., Monn, C. (2021). Simulation of SARS-CoV-2 Aerosol Emissions in the Infected Population and Resulting Airborne Exposures in Different Indoor Scenarios. *Aerosol Air Qual. Res.* 21, 200531. <https://doi.org/10.4209/aaqr.2020.08.0531>