



Resuming Higher-Risk Sports in Erie County

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed a heightened responsibility on youth sports organizations, coaches, families, and athletes to reduce transmission and to foster a safe environment for sports participation. On Friday, January 22, 2021 Governor Cuomo announced he would allow higher risk sports to commence in New York effective February 1, 2021 subject to local health department approval. It is important that athletes, coaching staff, parents, schools and organizations consider a variety of factors before making an individual decision.

Sports and recreation organizations must follow the New York State Department of Health's [INTERIM GUIDANCE FOR SPORTS AND RECREATION DURING THE COVID-19 PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY](#) and applicable Executive Orders. Per current State guidance, organizations must limit capacity of indoor facilities to no more than 50 percent occupancy and limit spectators to no more than two spectators per player, in addition to implementing social distancing, face coverings, and enhanced disinfection protocols.

There is significant risk involved in allowing higher-risk sports to resume. Weighing the risk versus benefit of return to sports is driven by the sport and setting, local disease activity, and individual circumstances, including underlying health conditions that may place the athlete or household contacts at increased risk of severe disease should they contract COVID-19.

- For moderate- and higher-risk sports, 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.
 - As with all positive COVID-19 cases in Erie County, contact tracing will be conducted for players and coaching staff, and coaches and teammates identified as close contacts will be placed in quarantine.
- Travel for games and competitions outside the Western New York (WNY) and Finger Lakes regions is strongly discouraged. All current NYS Travel Advisory guidance for quarantine will apply to athletes, coaches and family members who choose to travel to non-contiguous states.
- Athletes are required to wear an appropriate cloth face covering/mask when not playing or practicing. For children under the age of 18, at a parent's direction a child may wear a mask when playing or practicing.
- The use of locker rooms is strongly discouraged. If locker rooms are used, they must be cleaned/disinfected as per NYSDOH guidance.
- Spectators are limited to two per player. In addition, indoor sports facilities are limited to allow 50% of capacity into their facility.

- 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.
- Vaccination status does not alter regulation requirements.

All other requirements outlined in the January 2021 update and future updates to the Interim Guidance for Sports and Recreation must be followed by sports teams, recreation activities, and facilities where games and practices are held.

League staff, school athletic directors, sports facility directors, coaches and parents are strongly encouraged to review this guidance and take steps to make sure current team and league operations align with this updated guidance.

Tips for players, coaching staff, parents and spectators returning to high-risk sports:

- Families should review and discuss school and league COVID-19 policies as well as [CDC recommendations](#) for youth sports.
- Always follow safety protocols.
- Prioritize noncontact activity, including drills maintaining physical or social distancing.
- If physical distancing can't be maintained, use cloth face coverings or masks as directed in state guidance.
- Reinforce appropriate hygiene and respiratory etiquette through signage, education, and use of handwashing stations or hand sanitizer.
- Maintain practice pods in small sizes without mixing athletes.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces on the field, court, or play surface, as well as drinking fountains. This should be done at least daily or as much as possible.
- Reduce use of shared equipment and communal spaces, such as locker rooms.
- Avoid poorly ventilated areas and small spaces. Use fans or open doors and windows when possible.
- Don't allow athletes to share food and drink. Participants should always use their own water bottles.

Additional areas of concern that require consideration include:

- the potential spread of COVID-19 variants that may be present in the community;
- the increased risk of exposure inherent in overnight travel situations;
- quarantine of close contacts from a team if a player or coach tests positive for COVID-19;
- equity and capacity issues for routine testing;

- the organization’s ability to monitor and enforce compliance to state sports and recreation guidance;
- the appropriate and timely reporting of COVID-19 exposures that occur in sports settings to local health authorities.

Contact sports bring people close together and increase the risk of transmission. If schools, organizations, athletes, and their parents/guardians choose to return to high-risk sports they must do so in a safe manner and give considerable thought to curtail the spread of COVID-19. In addition, the athletes must restrict their activity away from sports, minimizing their own risks and reducing community spread. We must work together during these stressful times to ensure that our youth has the opportunity to participate in athletics safely.

ECDOH also provides this additional note for the higher risk sport of wrestling. In the interests of limiting risk and protecting the health of athletes, their classmates, households, and coaching and teaching staff within schools, [WNY health department leaders issued a statement in January 2021](#) that strongly recommended interscholastic, intramural and amateur wrestling teams and leagues cancel or postpone their winter 2021 seasons to a later date, when community transmission of COVID-19 is significantly lower.

Additional Resources:

[CDC Toolkit for Youth Sports](#)

[NY Forward Interim Guidance for Sports and Recreation \(Jan. 22, 2021\)](#)

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