



ULSTER COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

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HEALTH RISK COMMUNICATION

I hope that this finds you and your family healthy and safe. At the Ulster County Department of Health, the protection of the public's health is our primary mission. Governor Cuomo has announced that schools in New York State may allow high-risk sports and recreation activities as of February 1, 2021, if permitted by local health departments. **This document is provided to assist you in making an informed choice for your child regarding his or her participation in these high-risk sports activities. As parents ourselves, we agree that you know your child and their circumstances the best.**

The COVID-19 global pandemic, as of January 31, 2021 in Ulster County, has resulted in 9550 confirmed cases as well as 213 deaths. Sadly, we continue to see additional deaths in our County every day. The prevalence of COVID-19 in our region is higher than the statewide average. Our County 7- day percent positivity rolling average is 4.5%. We continue to see positive COVID-19 cases across all our towns and villages, and in every one of our school districts.

The CDC "Indicators and thresholds for risk of introduction and transmission of COVID-19 in schools" is outlined in the document found at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/community/schools-childcare/indicators-thresholds-table.pdf>. In addition, we are finding that there are variant strains present in our state. Globally, we are seeing reports of a disproportionate impact of the SARS CoV-2 UK (B.1.1.7) variant in women and children. While Ulster County is administering every dose of vaccine given to us by the State and Federal government, we are nowhere near achieving "herd immunity" with the current rate of vaccine allocation.

While children account for fewer cases of COVID disease, some children seem to be at risk for developing more severe complications from COVID-19, such as multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C), which is of great concern, especially for children who are medically fragile. For more information about MIS-C, please visit the following website:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/children/mis-c.html>. Of additional concern is that the American Academy of Pediatrics noted that in the two- week period from 12/31/20-1/14/21, there was an 18% increase in child COVID-19 cases.

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

Please understand that the State's decision to permit higher-risk sports and recreation activities does not mean that the health risk posed by COVID-19 has been eliminated. In fact, as the recent study by the Journal of the American Medical Association found, while in-school transmission of COVID-19 was not found to be high, the resumption of in-person athletics and resumption of the high-risk sports such as wrestling, does increase the risk of disease spread. This study concluded that, "Even though high school athletics are highly valued by many students and parents, indoor practice or competition and school-related social gatherings with limited adherence to physical distancing and other mitigation strategies could jeopardize the safe operation of in-person education. While there are likely many factors, the pressure to continue high school athletics during the pandemic might be driven at least in part by scholarship concerns; colleges and universities recruiting athletes for the 2021/2022 academic year should consider approaches that do not penalize students for interruptions to high school sports related to the pandemic to avoid incentivizing activities posing high risk for SARS-CoV-2 infection." Please see the study for more information: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2775875>.

Additionally, this article cites a recent CDC report regarding an outbreak of COVID-19 that resulted from a wrestling tournament. For more information regarding the CDC investigation, please see <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7004e4.htm>

As you are aware, any time people are gathered, there is a risk of exposure to COVID-19, which can lead to serious medical conditions and even death. Symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals can spread the virus, and indoor, close contact practices and tournaments increase this risk further. In the Spring of 2020, the resumption of college sports activities resulted in campus closings, conversion to remote learning, and increased community transmission. Masking, distancing, and other mitigation measures reduce, but do not eliminate the risk. The American Academy of Pediatrics COVID-19 Interim Guidance: Return to Sports warns that masks cannot be worn for all activities. The Academy also recommended that students should have a medical clearance, especially for student athletes who have contracted COVID-19 in the past. Please see: <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid...ns/clinical-guidance/covid-19-interim-guidance-return-to-sports/> for more information regarding the recommendations.

Additionally, there is a significant risk of transmission to those in the home of an infected student-athlete. The JAMA study also noted that, "Outbreaks among athletes participating in high contact sports can impact in-person learning for all students and increase risk for secondary in-school and community transmission with potentially severe outcomes, including death." The CDC conducted a study entitled,

“Implementation and Evolution of Mitigation Measures, Testing, and Contact Tracing in the National Football League, August 9–November 21, 2020” which concluded that, “To date, the ability to define a close contact has been limited. [This study] confirmed that cumulative brief interactions exceeding 15 minutes in total could lead to transmission.” For more information, see <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7004e2.htm>.

Parents should understand that other social interactions associated with an actual practice or competition, including but not limited to interactions in locker rooms and buses, are also potential places of COVID transmission among student-athletes. Many counties have had experience with positive athletes participating in sports tournaments, which has resulted in students and staff needing to be isolated and quarantined.

Decisions made by parents and guardians today can help contribute to the safest possible in-person operation of schools. These are often not easy decisions and require a balancing of the public health best practices to limit the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in the community and other societal factors. As we collectively learn more about this ongoing pandemic, new health information will be shared with you. With two vaccines now being distributed, and more vaccine options anticipated for the near future, there is every reason to hope for a much safer environment for schools and school- related activities as time progresses. However, at the present time, there are no COVID (SARS CoV-2) vaccines that have been authorized for use in children under 16 years of age.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact the Ulster County Department of Health at 845-340-3150 or the Ulster County Recovery Service Center at 845- 443-8888.

The Health Department takes the health and safety of our children very seriously, even more so during the worst public health crisis in a century. While disease transmission continues daily, we need to proceed with caution and take every measure possible to resume in-person activities safely and responsibly.

Sincerely,

Carol M. Smith, MD, MPH, MS

Commissioner of Health for Ulster County