

Sporting events during the COVID-19 pandemic

Considerations for public health authorities

Based on existing WHO's guidance

28 May 2021

Across the WHO European Region, governments and event organizers are putting plans in place to restart events that bring together large numbers of people in sometimes crowded settings. These decisions are based on progress in bringing down the number of reported cases and deaths from COVID-19, due to increasing vaccination coverage, enhanced testing and contact-tracing capacities, adherence to public health and social measures, and emerging treatment options.

However, this pandemic is not over yet. Many countries are loosening their public health and social measures, which will favour spread of the virus. Our message is clear: only the coordinated implementation of all public health and social measures will bring transmission down and keep the virus under control.

- For governments, this means rolling out vaccination, and continuing testing and contact-tracing, quarantine and isolation of contacts and cases, tailored patient care and targeted risk communication.
- Adherence to individual-level precautionary measures provides the most cost-effective and reliable protection against COVID-19 infection. This means maintaining physical distancing, practising hand and respiratory hygiene, wearing masks and opting for outdoor spaces, or ensuring good ventilation when indoors.

The beautiful game: staying safe while watching and playing

Sports events can attract a particularly high attendance of domestic and international spectators who come together at stadiums, pitches and fan zones but also before and after the events themselves. These might occur at fan activities, public squares, airports, on buses, trains and other "pinch points" where people come together in large numbers.

To better protect spectators, athletes, delegates and hosting communities from increased transmission of SARS-CoV-2, and to assist national health systems of the host countries, WHO strongly recommends the following:

1. **Coordinate the decision-making process** around an event with all stakeholders, and in particular with the event organizers in an inclusive, transparent and open way.
2. Exercise caution and **rethink the need for international travel and organizing mass gathering events** where spectators attend in person if community transmission is ongoing.¹
3. **Use a risk-based approach** to decide whether to hold, modify, postpone or cancel mass gatherings, and tailor decision-making on a factual assessment of the overall risk associated with the event.
4. **Enhance public health and social measures** if events do take place, not just in competition venues, but also outside in places and on transport used by fans and the host community.

WHO has a mandate to support national health authorities to prepare and manage mass gathering events by providing technical guidance, scientific briefs and sharing best practices. WHO has also developed specific guidance and tools for mass gathering events of a sporting, cultural or religious nature, and elections.

Technical guidance to support decision-making for sports events

- Considerations for sports federations/sports event organizers when planning mass gatherings in the context of COVID-19: interim guidance. 14 April 2020 ²
- Guidance for the use of the WHO mass gatherings sports: addendum risk assessment tools in the context of COVID-19. 30 April 2020 ³
- WHO Mass gathering COVID-19 risk assessment tool – sports events. Guidance for authorities and organizers of sports events planning mass gatherings during the current COVID-19 pandemic. 10 July 2020 ⁴

Implementing a risk-based approach

Risk assessment is a continuous process that should occur throughout the period leading up to and during the event, starting from the initial concept of the gathering and stopping only after the event

¹ Considerations for implementing a risk-based approach to international travel in the context of COVID-19. Geneva: WHO; 2020 (<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Risk-based-international-travel-2020.1>, accessed 27 May 2021).

² <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/considerations-for-sports-federations-sports-event-organizers-when-planning-mass-gatherings-in-the-context-of-covid-19-interim-guidance>, accessed 27 May 2021).

³ Guidance for the use of the WHO mass gatherings sports: addendum risk assessment tools in the context of COVID-19. Geneva: WHO; 2020 (<https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/guidance-for-the-use-of-the-who-mass-gatherings-sports-addendum-risk-assessment-tools-in-the-context-of-covid-19>, accessed 27 May 2021).

⁴ WHO Mass gathering COVID-19 risk assessment tool – sports events, version 2. Geneva: WHO; 2020 (<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/10665-333187>, accessed 27 May 2021).

has finished and local systems have returned to “normal”.⁵ It should take into consideration the characteristics of the event (attendees, venues, duration, location, etc.), as well as the context in which the event takes place, including the following factors:

- changes in COVID-19 transmission patterns in the host country/city and the countries from where spectators and participants are travelling from;
- vaccination coverage in the host country;
- available treatment options and health-care capacity in the host country;
- planned, introduced and adherence to public health and social measures.

Enhancing public health and social measures

Besides conducting risk assessments, WHO urges Member States to promote and support adherence to public health and social measures in the event venues, as well as outside venues, in the streets, on public transport, in hotels and restaurants, etc. This includes frequent handwashing, respiratory etiquette, wearing a mask, physical distancing, good ventilation and avoiding crowded places or closed settings. These same measures apply also to people who are vaccinated, have recovered from the infection, and know their current status after being tested negative for COVID-19.

If a host country and the event organizer jointly decide to allow international spectators to participate in an event, risk mitigation measures should be considered. WHO⁶ and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)⁷ have issued recommendations on international travel.

- **Enhanced testing.** National health authorities of host countries might consider accelerating testing in cities hosting the events before, during and after they take place, to detect an early increase in COVID-19 transmission and the occurrence of possible clusters. The sequencing of viruses should be enhanced and shared to obtain a clearer picture of the possible spread of variants.⁸
- **Coordinated contact-tracing.** National IHR focal points (NFPs) of the visitor's country of origin and the game hosting country should coordinate contact-tracing through passenger

⁵ Public health for mass gatherings: key considerations. Geneva: WHO; 2020 (<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/public-health-for-mass-gatherings-key-considerations>, accessed 27 May 2021).

⁶ COVID-19 diagnostic testing in the context of international travel <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/337832?locale-attribute=pt&>

⁷ [Travel during the coronavirus pandemic | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/euro-observatory/en/publications/2020-03-23-travel-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic)

⁸ Laboratory testing strategy recommendations for COVID-19: interim guidance, 21 March 2020 <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/331509>

locator forms. Contacts from two days before to 14 days after symptom onset of confirmed cases should be identified, in line with WHO guidance for contact-tracing.⁹

- **Vaccination.** WHO promotes any effort to strengthen general vaccine uptake by the population, and to counter vaccine hesitancy. However, WHO does not recommend prioritizing vaccination roll-out in the host cities or for special groups of people, such as athletes or spectators, as this could lead to vaccine deficits for high-risk groups.
- **Targeted risk communication.** Health authorities of origin and receiving countries should provide accurate, accessible and relevant information to travellers to inform their decision to travel and their behaviour to minimize risks, including avoiding the three Cs: Closed, Confined and Crowded settings. Clear guidance and who to contact in case of COVID-19 symptoms and disease should be offered upon entry to the host country in multiple languages.

WHO support to countries of the European Region

On the request of Member States, the WHO Regional Office for Europe can provide training, simulation exercises and webinars on best practices as well as **conduct event-based monitoring** of the COVID-19 situation in the host countries/cities in collaboration with national health authorities through the IHR NFPs. Monitoring would take place two weeks before, during and two weeks after the event. The data will remain internal and will not be published.

For more information and request for support, please contact the following email address:
eurocme@who.int

⁹ Contact tracing in the context of COVID-19: interim guidance, 10 May 2020
<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/332049>