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ACHA Brief

Considerations for Institutions of Higher Education as Students Return Home

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The American College Health Association COVID-19 Task Force has compiled the following set of considerations as students return home at the end of the fall academic term. This document addresses areas of consideration for institutions of higher education and describes key messaging that should be provided to students as they prepare to leave campus. This document is purposely broad for universal use and written with the understanding that not all institutions will have the resources to implement everything written in this document. Additionally, due to the continually evolving COVID-19 situation in our country, this document is not inclusive of all concerns.

The fall term has presented many challenges to institutions of higher education as they implemented mitigation strategies; dealt with outbreaks of COVID-19; and supported students, faculty, and staff well-being through a stressful time. As the Thanksgiving holiday approaches and institutions prepare to end the fall term and send students home, planning for the safe exit from campus is quickly becoming a priority.

Some colleges and universities have decided to conclude the on-campus experience at Thanksgiving break, allowing students to return home until the beginning of the spring term. Those campuses should review the safe travel recommendations listed below.

For colleges and universities planning to continue on-campus classes after the Thanksgiving holiday, there are important risk reduction strategies to consider in order to prevent outbreaks on campus. One important strategy for these campuses to consider is to actively discourage students from traveling over the Thanksgiving break and encourage students to have a virtual Thanksgiving event with family members instead. Institutions should plan to provide on-campus meals and encourage staying in place for “Friendsgiving.” On-campus Thanksgiving dining plans should include physically distanced dining arrangements in well-ventilated or outdoor spaces with access to masks and hand sanitizer. An additional strategy for campuses to consider is to develop quarantine and testing protocols for students who choose to go home and return to campus.

Considerations for Campus Health Services

Regardless of whether the on-campus experience concludes before or after Thanksgiving, health services should anticipate that some students may not be able to travel home. Institutions should be prepared to provide housing and other services for students who are sick or have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 and may have to delay travel home. If students are in isolation or quarantine, their departure from campus should be delayed until they have been cleared for departure by health services after completing the quarantine or isolation period. Students who are ill should not travel.

Institutions should maintain active testing, contact tracing, and other public health measures until the end of the semester so that case rates are as low as possible when the semester ends. Institutions with fewer resources or a smaller health service staff should consider options to mitigate harm to others while considering campus-specific limitations. Health services should expect an increase in requests from students for SARS-CoV-2 testing prior to their exit from campus. Encourage students to adopt a “know before you go”

approach prior to travel, especially if there are cases of COVID-19 on campus or in the surrounding community. Institutions should provide information to students regarding location and availability of testing on campus or at off-campus facilities. Students should be reminded that the test only reflects one point in time, there can be false negative results, and, in some cases, the virus may be contracted during travel. A negative test is not a license to end other preventative measures such as mask wearing and physical distancing. Students should also consider getting tested following the completion of travel.

For students who remain on campus in isolation or quarantine, college health services need to create a plan for checking in on these students regularly and ensuring their well-being and access to necessities. Other students who remain on campus should be encouraged to create a holiday care plan detailing their strategy for self-care should they need to enter quarantine or isolation and to consult with health services as needed. Ideally, the decision for discharge from isolation or quarantine should be made by a health care professional.

Student Health Promotion and Educational Messaging

Student health services should consider bolstering health education during this critical time to prevent exporting COVID-19 back to students' home communities.

Student education regarding safeguards for predeparture and travel that is as safe as possible is key to the health and well-being of the student and their family members. Students should receive critical prevention and risk reduction messaging as early as possible prior to the end of the fall term so they can properly prepare to leave campus. The following information should be distributed broadly and in different languages.

Travel is known to increase risk; therefore, each student must be encouraged to carefully review data on the prevalence of COVID-19 on their campus, in the local community, and in their final destination. They also need to consider their own physical and mental health and assess their ability to leave the campus.

At least two weeks prior to departure, students should be encouraged to:

- Get an influenza vaccination.
- Review the regulations governing travel to their destination. Some states require the completion of a travelers' form prior to arrival, along with specific restrictions and testing requirements after arrival.
- Minimize risk of exposure and infection during the weeks leading to departure from campus. Any exposures could disrupt plans to go home. Remind students that if they become infected or if they are exposed to a person who is confirmed to be infected, they will need to isolate or quarantine before traveling. Travelers who are ill, are infected, or have recently been exposed to the virus will not be allowed to board airplanes and trains.
- Reduce the number of people with whom they have close contact prior to the trip. Any close interaction with persons outside immediate household or residence hall roommates will present an opportunity for infection.

Day of Travel Advice for Students

- Reduce the number of stops on the trip. Take a direct flight if possible, and if driving, pack food/snacks for the car trip home.
- Delay travel if sick or exposed. Anyone feeling ill, recently diagnosed with COVID-19 (within 10 days), or exposed to someone with COVID-19 (within 14 days) should self-isolate and delay travel. Students should follow guidance from their health care provider regarding when recommended isolation/quarantine periods are complete and travel can be resumed.
- Take safety precautions during travel, especially if using public transportation. Wear a face covering at all times and consider also wearing a face shield. Stay at least 6 feet away from other people; if not possible on public transportation, sit as far away from other passengers as possible. Carry and use hand sanitizer (with at least 60% alcohol) frequently.

- Use a disinfecting/sanitizing wipe to clean any touchable surfaces in the vehicle in which you are traveling. This includes planes, trains, and other forms of transportation.
- Re-check for any requirements or restrictions at your travel destination.
- The least risky option is private transportation by yourself or your family members. If in a car with others outside the household, wear a mask and sit in the back seat if someone else is driving. If weather conditions permit, open the windows.

Arrival at Home Advice for Students

- The most cautious approach upon arrival home is to quarantine for the first 14 days after arrival. This is especially important if there are vulnerable, higher risk individuals living in the home and/or there is high prevalence on the campus or in the local community surrounding the campus prior to leaving for home.
 - Quarantining in the home includes eating meals in a private space or outdoors with family at least 6 ft apart.
 - Use separate serving ware, utensils, glasses, and plates.
 - Use a separate bathroom from other family members. If not possible, disinfect the bathroom after each use.
 - Avoid physical contact including hugging, kissing, and shaking hands.
 - Wear a mask and maintain a distance of at least 6 ft when in the presence of others.
 - Restrict movement within and outside the home.
- If quarantine is not possible, stay physically distant from family household members, wear a face covering, and avoid close contact, including hugging and shaking hands, for the first 14 days home.
- Consider placing HEPA filter units in the home and opening windows to increase air circulation.

Medical and Mental Health and Well-Being While at Home

- Encourage students to reach out for help or guidance from their primary care provider, psychologist/mental health clinician, or college health or counseling center if they are feeling sad, anxious, or hopeless or if they feel emotional distress of any kind.
- Encourage students to consult their primary care provider at home, especially if they have any pre-existing conditions or develop any possible symptoms of COVID-19.
- Encourage students to get a flu vaccine if they haven't already done so.

Additional Resources

Consult the following CDC websites for additional information on travel and on safer ways to celebrate holidays with family and friends:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/travel-during-covid19.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/holidays.html>



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