



Rules Modifications & Guidelines

Softball

Spring 2021

General Information

Every school district/program should consult with their local health department to determine which risk level to start this program safely. Continued consultation with the local health department should be used to determine when progression to the next risk level can be initiated.

Playing sports come with inherent risks (twisted ankles to concussions). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought additional risks to group activities/sports. The MIAA has developed these modifications to lower risks from COVID-19 using National and State guidelines and input from medical specialists. Playing any sport (even with modified play) will continue to carry some risk of acquiring COVID-19 but these modifications were developed to help guide schools in best practices to limit exposure while offering an opportunity for interscholastic athletics for those sports approved for EEA Level 3 participation. The Mass Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) categorizes sports as: “Lower Risk”, “Moderate Risk”, “Higher Risk”. These categories are based on how the sport is traditionally played. Additional information can be found on their website: [EEA Youth and Amateur Sports Resources](#)

This document is to be utilized in compliance with all EEA, DESE and DPH guidelines in place.

Learn more about participation in athletics during the pandemic by taking the free NFHS online course: “[COVID-19 for Coaches and Administrators](#)”

Mitigation of COVID-19 Spread:

It is important to note that COVID-19 infection related to youth sports seems to spread from outside the field play. Coaches are encouraged to remind athletes about mitigation strategies including distancing and mask wearing. Athletes are encouraged to support the active cooperation of all students within the school community by adhering to social distancing and mask wearing in all settings.

Pre-Workout/Pre-Contest Screening:

Student-athletes, coaches, spectators, and any others associated with the athletic program may not attend practices or games if they are isolated for illness or quarantined for exposure to infection.

Prior to attending practices or games, athletes and coaches should check their temperature. If a student-athlete or a coaching staff member has a temperature of 100.4 degrees or above, they should not attend practices or games. Likewise if they have any other symptoms of COVID-19 infection (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>), they should not attend practices or games. Student-athletes and coaches who have symptoms of COVID-19 infection should test and isolate in accordance with DPH guidance.

For students with symptoms who test negative for COVID-19 infection, they may return to sport once they are approved to return to school (when afebrile for 24 hours and symptomatically improved).

Student-athletes and coaches who are diagnosed with COVID-19 infection should rest and avoid exercise for ten days from symptom onset. Procedures for return to activity/play should follow CDC, DPH, and local board of health guidelines (CDC link above). In addition, persons with COVID-19 infection need to receive written clearance from their health care provider and school administrator/designee to return to sport. Return to activity should be slow and graded.

The links below are examples of Graduated Return to Play protocols. These examples are not required protocols mandated by the MIAA, rather resources for information.

[British Journal of Sports Medicine Infographic](#)
[MA Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics](#)

Student-athletes, coaches, spectators, and any others associated with the athletic program who were exposed to COVID-19 must quarantine, including no participation in practices or games following exposure, and should follow all CDC, DPH, and local board of health protocols. Athletes and coaches should receive written clearance from their school administrator/designee to return to sport.

Should a player be quarantined because of a COVID-19 designation, he/she must participate in a minimum of one practice before returning to interscholastic competition. Should a player being quarantined because of a positive diagnosis of COVID-19 the ATC/Athletic Director should consider a more extensive return-to-play protocol for the individual player(s). It is necessary for all athletes to complete all other state guidelines.

COVID-19 Testing:

Recent developments in COVID-19 testing have become more prevalent within the Commonwealth. For Higher Risk sports, the use of COVID-19 testing may help to support the continued participation throughout the entire season of play.

Cohorts and/or Participants:

A record should be kept of all individuals present at team activities i.e. – practices, practice cohorts, competitions, etc.

Weather Resources:

Extreme caution should be exercised when making decisions to participate in athletics when temperatures may present challenges to athletes' health and safety. The following links will help to offer information in planning for safe practice and play during extreme temperature conditions.

- [MIAA Heat Modification Policy](#)
- [MIAA SMC Cold Weather Reference Document](#)
- [NATA: Environmental Cold Injuries](#)
- [NFHS: Participating in Cold Weather – Minimizing the Risk](#)
- [NFHS: Guidelines for Competition in the Cold](#)

Social Distancing:

- **Practice** – Coaches are responsible for ensuring social distancing is maintained between players as much as possible. This includes additional spacing between athletes while stretching, warming up, chatting, changing drills, etc. Athletes must maintain spacing, and there should be no congregating of athletes while running drills. Workouts, when possible could be conducted in 'pods' of athletes, with the same 5-10 athletes always working out together. Ideally athletes should not move between pods for the entire season. This ensures more limited exposure if someone develops an infection. Records should be kept of who is in each group, each day.
- **Locker Rooms** – Locker rooms and changing areas must follow current EEA Guidance ([EEA Guidance Page 8](#)), except for toilet facilities. Facility Operators should ensure that users can abide by capacity restrictions and social distancing standards and establish signage and visual guidelines. Signage should remind users to limit time spent in enclosed area. If locker rooms are utilized, staggered use based on time and distance is recommended.

When possible, students should report to workouts in proper gear and immediately return home to shower, clean clothing, and equipment at the end of every workout.

- **Benches** – No benches should be used during practice. Players' items should be separated as below for personal items, at least 6 feet apart. Benches should be permitted only during games with six feet of distancing required between participants. ([EEA Guidance Page 9](#))
- **Playing Surface Access** – Only essential personnel are permitted on the practice/competition field. These are defined as athletes, coaches, medical personnel/athletic trainers, and officials (competition). All others (i.e., managers, photographers, media, etc.) are considered non-essential personnel and are not to be on the field of play.
- **Personal Items** – It is recommended that each athlete bring their own gym bag for personal items (see gym bag information below). All personal items should

remain in the gym bag when not in use. Gym bags should be placed in a predetermined area 6 feet apart for the duration of practice.

- **Huddles** – Social distancing (6 feet between individuals) must be maintained, and face coverings utilized at all times. Communicating with smaller groups is preferred. Huddles may not occur in locker rooms.
- **Team Handshakes** – Athletes shall NOT exchange handshakes before, during or following practices and competitions. Some MIAA sport specific modifications suggest sportsmanship recognition practices which replace handshakes.
- **Spectators** – Spectators must practice social distancing between different household units and accept personal responsibility for public health guidelines. The number of spectators is determined in compliance with EEA Guidance. ([EEA Guidance Page 7](#))
- **Media** – All social distancing and hygiene guidelines for spectators must be followed by media members planning to attend games. Media members should contact host school administrators prior to arriving at games to plan appropriate entry and available workspace.
- **Travel** – Student-athletes, coaches, spectators, and any others associated with the athletic program (if not from the same household) are required to wear face coverings during travel to and from game locations. This is particularly important for carpool and bus situations.

COVID-19 Coach/Site Supervisor:

- Schools must designate a coach/site supervisor to be responsible for responding to COVID-19 concerns and supervising adherence to established COVID-19 protocols.
- All coaches, staff, officials, and families should know who this person is and how to contact them.
- All athletic directors/designee must follow established EEA guidelines for program and/or game management.
- Train coaches, officials, and staff on all safety protocols. Conduct training virtually and ensure that social distancing is maintained during training. (NFHS COVID-19 FREE Course)
- Coaches, athletes, officials, and spectators are required to cooperate with the local board of health whenever requested.

Practice and Game Protocols:

- **Masks/Face Coverings** – Athletes are required to wear cloth face coverings/masks per EEA guidelines, including always covering both the nose

and mouth. Gaiters are permissible, except in Rugby, if permitted by local/school policy. Face coverings comprised of multiple layers and a tighter weave are more effective and mandatory. Masks with valves or filters are not permitted.

The most effective fabrics for cloth masks are:

- Tightly woven fabrics, such as cotton and cotton blends
- Breathable
- Two or three layers

Less effective fabrics for cloth masks are:

- Loosely woven fabrics, such as loose knit fabrics
- Those that are difficult to breathe through (like plastic or leather)
- Single layer

Mask breaks may be taken for drinking, and when needed for breathing comfort. Mask breaks may only be taken when greater than 6 feet of distance can be maintained from all others.

All athletes, especially those that use mouthpieces, should prepare to have extra face coverings available. If mouthguards are removed on the sidelines or bench area, the athlete should use hand sanitizer each time after touching the mouthguard. Athletes are reminded that mouthguards must remain inserted in the mouth at all times for those sports that require mouthguards.

Athletes whose mask becomes damp should change regularly. Masks should be exchanged when damp or soiled. Caution should be exercised when replacing a mask if hands are soiled or dirty.

All individuals that are unable to wear a face covering due to a medical condition or disability must provide a medical note to the school administrator/designee excusing the player from wearing a mask. This note must always be in the possession of the head coach and available to the opposing head coach and/or game officials upon request. The head coach is the only participant that can submit documented permission of “non-mask” participation. Student-athletes cannot discuss or present non-mask permission to an official. It is recommended that athletic directors work to advise officials’ assignors in advance of a contest if their teams have non-mask participants.

It is the responsibility of the head coach to monitor and ensure that all players are wearing face coverings. Game administrators, home athletic director, or other designee may also assist in monitoring this.

Coaches and officials are also required to wear face coverings. Spectators, workers, and others are also required to wear face coverings and are expected to follow social distancing guidelines.

- **Player habits** – Coaches should work to break old habits and create new ones to minimize the spread of the virus. Spitting, nose clearing on the field, licking fingers, and spitting on gloves during practices and competitions is not

permitted. The habit of minimizing any touching of the face and covering the cough should be practiced.

Given that indoor conditions and ventilation impact the playing of indoor sports, it is recommended that indoor participants and everyone in attendance work to refrain from active yelling due to the increased opportunity for droplet transmission. Coaches and game administrators are encouraged to monitor this and remind participants to eliminate any unnecessary shouting.

- It is required that teams delineate with a physical marker (cone, spray paint etc.) the social distancing requirements (6 ft) for their players and coaches while on the sideline area.
- **Interaction with Officials** – Coaches must follow social distancing guidelines (6 feet) when interacting with an official or any other individual. Conversations can occur at a distance. Athletes should not approach a referee closer than 6 feet at any time.
- **Hand sanitizer and/or sanitizing wipes** – Athletes, coaches, and officials are encouraged to provide their own hand sanitizer (at least 60% alcohol) and/or sanitizing wipes and use them frequently – including prior to taking the field and upon return to the sideline. Additionally, it is emphasized to avoid touching the face throughout practice and competition.
- **Ventilation should be optimized:** [EEA Guidance Page 11](#)
- **Pre-Game Introductions and Preparation** – If pre-game meetings are necessary, they should be held with limited team representation – a single coach, single captain, etc. At the pregame meeting, all participants are required to wear face coverings and to socially distance from all participants

If a school chooses to do introductions, players will take their position on the field prior to being introduced. Introductions are suggested to be limited or eliminated to decrease time of athletes on the competition field.

The National Anthem may be played before competition. Appropriate social distancing must be maintained by teams and all personnel during the National Anthem. Singing the National Anthem indoors should not be permitted.

Indoor musical performances at interscholastic athletic events are not permitted.

- **Ball Retrievers** – Ball retrievers for any sport ARE NOT permitted. See sport specific modifications for extra ball placement procedures.
- **Post-Game Procedures** – Refer to Team Handshakes in this guidance. Recognition of the other team, coaches and/or officials should be done from a

distance greater than 6 feet and should not delay departure from the competition venue. Teams and group of players should maintain social distancing (6 feet between individuals) and/or staggering departure times at the conclusion of the contest.

Equipment:

- **General Equipment** – There should be no shared athletic equipment unless required by the sport rules, i.e. – one basketball is used during competition and must be used by all players. Individual sport modifications should be followed for planned and periodic disinfecting. Any equipment that is used for practice should be cleaned and disinfected prior to and immediately following practice. Only one individual should handle the set-up and break-down of equipment on any given day (i.e., goals, cones, etc.).
- **Balls - For moderate and high-risk sports** - Each player should bring their own ball or use the same school-issued ball during practice. Skill training, conditioning, agility, etc. can be done with the one player/one ball concept. Balls must be sanitized before and after each practice/game. Sport specific modifications also list other ball cleaning practices during competition.
- **Personal Items** – Shoes, clothing, towels, and other personal items must not be shared among athletes. Any items that are not currently being worn/used should be stored inside a personal gym bag. Gym bags should be placed in a predetermined area 6 feet apart for the duration of practice/competition.

Hydration:

- All students must bring their own water bottle. Water bottles cannot be shared. Student-athletes should bring enough water for the entire game.
- Bench water may be provided by the facility host, but the visiting team/participants should supply their own coolers unless agreed upon by the facility host. If used, water coolers shall be sanitized prior to use and frequently during the contest and disposable one-time-use cups shall be utilized.
- Hydration stations (water cows, water trough, water fountains, etc.) should NOT be utilized. If water coolers or other large volume water container is utilized, it can only be accessed by a “designated” refill person with proper PPE. The squirting of water by anyone but the person drinking from their own water bottle is not permitted.
- Water fountains are to be used as refill stations ONLY.

Gym Bag – Supplies recommended for your personal gym bag:

- Reusable facial coverings/masks – The mask/face covering must be worn at all times. Sport specific modification may have further guidance for face coverings. All participants should have at least multiple back-up face covering.

- Warm-up clothing, electronic devices, and other personal items that are used by the athlete, prior to practice/competition, must be placed back in the gym bag before practice/competition begins.
- Athletes are recommended to always have a personal bottle of hand sanitizer available. There will be less chance of possible cross contamination and less time standing around waiting to use a shared hand sanitizer. Be sure to have this inside a sealable bag in case it leaks. This will be used when you enter and exit the practice/competition site, and at other necessary times in between.
- Athletes are recommended to have disinfectant wipes for personal use. When using a restroom area, it is best to disinfect any surface that may be touched, before and after using the facilities.
- Athletic braces, tape, inhalers, or any other sports-medical item used before, during or after practice/meets should be stored in a personal gym bag when not in use.
- Additional shoes should also be stored in a separate compartment or bag inside a gym bag to prevent possible cross contamination with other items in the gym bag.
- Any other item that is deemed necessary for practice or competition must be stored in the gym bag when it is not being used.

Softball Specific Modifications

General Game Requirements:

- Face Masks are required at all times; Gaiters are permissible but must be multiply
- Before, during and after the contest, players, coaches, game officials, team personnel and game administration officials must wash and sanitize their hands as often as possible
- At conclusion of contests, coaches and players will manage social distancing while departing benches
- Spectator attendance will follow EEA guidelines with consideration for venue, school, and league policies.

Team Benches and Personnel:

- Everyone must have their own beverage container that is not shared; Container must be labeled for each participant
- Non-essential personnel in the dugout, field and near participants throughout the contest must be limited.
- Limit bench personnel to allow for social distancing of 6 ft. or greater, teams must develop additional area(s) beyond the provided team bench for players to spread out for water breaks, social distancing, and other needs. Team benches must expand to areas on the sidelines that allow players to use additional

seating allocated for players and coaches (only) to adhere to the 6 ft spacing guidelines.

- Disinfect equipment and uniform after use.
- Softball equipment bags must adhere to specified protocols listed under Personal Items and Gym Bag protocols.

Locker Rooms:

- Adhere to established EEA guidelines for locker rooms [EEA document page 8](#).

Game Officials:

- Must wear a mask at all times per [EEA document page 5](#).
- Must plan to arrive at the facility dressed in uniform per [EEA document page 9](#).
- Do not share uniforms, towels, apparel, and equipment
- Must bring their own water bottles
- Plate Umpire
 - The plate umpire must minimize the time in close proximity to the catcher, “stepping in” as late as possible
 - The plate umpire should work to allow safe distance from the catcher while maintaining positioning to officiate the contest
 - The plate umpire must use optimal mask fitting while in the position behind the catcher

Game Modifications and Management:

- Limitations on total players - 20 players per team total. Field design respective of social distancing may dictate total players that may participate in a contest.
- No seeds, gum or spitting is allowed during the 2020-2021 Spring Season
- No licking of fingers or spitting on hands
- The umpire will issue a warning (1st offense) to a player if they intentionally remove their mask
 - 2nd offense the coach will be warned about the player removing their mask
 - 3rd offense the player will be removed from the game.
- Captains and coaches must maintain social distancing of 6 ft. when talking or conferring with a game umpire.
- Game umpires will maintain social distancing of 6 ft. during the pre-game meeting with 1 captain from each team and head coaches.
- Social distancing must be maintained at all times; this includes but is not limited to:
 - While in the dugout
 - During timeouts/coach talking to pitcher and other players on the field
- Home team MUST supply both teams with 3 game balls, which the pitchers will keep during the entire game.
 - Home team must have more balls available in case of loss balls/damaged balls
- Players must bring and use their own equipment (gloves, bats, helmets, etc.)
 - If a player is unable to bring their own equipment and must share with another teammate, the equipment must be sprayed with a sanitizer before and after each use.
- Suspend pregame protocol of shaking hands during introductions/pregame meeting.
- Suspend postgame protocol of shaking hands

- Concessions are not allowed for softball games
- Media location is to be determined by the host school; all media members must wear a mask at all times, and follow all social distancing guidelines for spectators. Advance notification to host school administration is required.

EDUCATIONAL ATHLETICS

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