



STATEMENT ON RISK OF COVID-19 DURING HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS

National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) Sports Medicine Advisory Committee (SMAC)

In May of 2020, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) Sports Medicine Advisory Committee (SMAC) distributed GUIDANCE FOR OPENING UP HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS AND ACTIVITIES to state high school associations. A key component of that document was an outline of high-, moderate- and low-risk sports under the heading “Potential Infection Risk by Sport.” The NFHS SMAC determined “potential infection risk” based upon its knowledge of the coronavirus at that time. Thus, an emphasis was placed upon avoiding close contact (for even brief periods of time) and sharing equipment. As our knowledge of how the virus that causes COVID-19 has evolved, we have increasingly recognized that transmission depends upon multiple factors that cannot be easily accounted for by simply dividing sports into three distinct categories of risk.

No individual or team sport can be determined to be solely HIGH, MODERATE or LOW risk based upon current available research. Coronavirus transmission rates in all sports vary based upon multiple factors and exist on a continuum. Prevailing community infection rates appear to be the strongest predictor for high school athletes being infected, and proven cases of direct transmission of coronavirus in the athletic setting remain relatively rare. Differences in incidence rates between sports are also relative as a “4 times greater infection rate” for one sport over the other may mean 13 per 100,000 player-days versus 52 per 100,000 player-days – both very small numbers.

Based upon a review of current Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations, the shared experiences of dozens of states participating in high school athletics, and emerging published and unpublished data, the NFHS SMAC no longer endorses the use of the tiered “Potential Infection Risk by Sport” that was included in the GUIDANCE FOR OPENING UP HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS AND ACTIVITIES.

The following factors should be strongly considered by stakeholders in assessing the potential for COVID-19 transmission related to high school athletics:

1. COVID-19 rates of participants in any given sport are directly proportional to prevailing community disease rates.
2. Participants in non-contact sports show lower rates of COVID-19 than contact sports.
3. Participants in outdoor sports show lower rates of COVID-19 than indoor sports.
4. Face mask use while participating in indoor sports results in COVID-19 rates comparable to the rates found in outdoor sports.

5. The great majority of sports-related spread of COVID-19 does not appear to occur during sports participation, but from social contact. Maximizing efforts to prevent this type of spread remains paramount. Social distancing, mask use, staying home while ill and proper hygiene must continue to be emphasized in the locker room, on the sidelines, and while traveling, dining and interacting in the community.

References

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