

## Covid-19: Return to Training and Play Guidelines for Inter County Teams

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## **Introduction and Context**

The Covid-19 Advisory Group has reviewed this guidance document to inform and facilitate the safe resumption of intercounty activities within the Gaelic Games family. First published in 2020, the Guidelines were approved by the Irish Government's Expert Advisory Group on Return to Sport

The GAA, Ladies Gaelic Football and Camogie Associations have ensured to date that any proposals and recommendations in relation to the resumption of activities and the reopening of facilities has complied with best guidance as provided by the Governments and National Health agencies on the island of Ireland.

These guidelines outline and define recommended practice for the recommencement of inter county activities in a manner which preserves the safety of players, management and support teams. The efforts of players, coaches, medics, backroom personnel, match officials and Administrators in 2020 in ensuring that the guidelines in this document were diligently followed was a key reason for the success of the season. It will be even more important this year in ensuring a safe and enjoyable year for everyone involved,

The priority at all times must be to protect the health and welfare of all those involved with Gaelic Games and to minimise the risk of transmission within the wider community.

Participation is voluntary; players, mentors, backroom personnel, match officials and officers may choose to opt-in or opt-out from activity at any level at their discretion.

Finally, it should be noted that this is a working document and may change as new health advice or changes in Government regulations become available.

Shay Bannon  
Chairman,  
Covid Advisory Group  
Aibreán 2021

## Section 1 – MEDICAL INFORMATION

### 1. Background Information

COVID-19 is a viral infection which is highly infectious and contagious. COVID-19 disease is caused by infection with a virus, technically named SARS-CoV-2 virus, is a newly identified (novel) virus and the seventh (7th) Coronavirus known to infect humans. The resulting viral illness is referred to as COVID-19 disease. This virus is in the same coronavirus family as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (SARS-CoV or SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV or MERS), which caused the two previous coronavirus epidemic outbreaks, and have similar physical and biochemical properties and comparable transmission routes as COVID-19.

Most people infected with the COVID-19 virus will experience no symptoms or mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Those who are infected may be infectious for 48 hours before symptoms appear. Based on current knowledge, younger healthy people are less likely to develop severe symptoms. ***However, if infected, they may spread the disease to their families, friends, colleagues, and teammates.***

The first vaccine was approved by the European Medicines Agency in December 2020 and vaccination programmes are currently being rolled out North and South of the border. The vaccines are highly effective at preventing severe disease. For those individuals who have been fully vaccinated there is not change to the current infection prevention and control guidelines outlined below. There is no specific antiviral treatment for this infection.

### 2. Transmission of Virus

SARS CoV2 is spread from person to person through:

- droplets generated when an infected person coughs, sneezes or speaks.
- close contact with an infected person while they are infectious (in particular by spending more than 15 minutes of face-to-face contact within 2 metres of an infected person or living in the same house or shared accommodation)
- touching surfaces that are contaminated by droplets coughed or sneezed from an infected person and bringing your unwashed hands to your face

### 3. Symptoms

It can take up to 14 days for symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) to appear; however, most people develop symptoms between 5-6 days. Individuals may have no symptoms but have the virus and pass the infection to others. Virus shedding appears to be highest at the time of symptom onset and just before the onset of symptoms.

**Common symptoms** of coronavirus include:

- a fever (high temperature of 37.5° C (degrees Celsius or above)
- a cough - this can be any kind of cough, not just a dry cough
- shortness of breath or breathing difficulties
- loss of sense of smell (anosmia)
- loss of sense of taste (ageusia) or distortion of sense of taste (dysgeusia)

**Less common symptoms** of coronavirus include:

- diarrhoea
- aches & pains
- conjunctivitis
- rash
- chilblains on fingers/toes

#### **4. *Staying Safe - 6 Rules to Follow***

Safe return to contact sports is the personal responsibility of each player/backroom member.

##### ***(1) Wash your hands frequently***

Regularly and thoroughly clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water (for 20 seconds). Washing your hands with soap and water or using alcohol-based hand rub kills viruses that may be on your hands.

##### ***(2) Maintain social distancing***

Observe social distancing guidelines and keep this distance between yourself and others, especially anyone who is coughing or sneezing. When someone coughs or sneezes, they spray small liquid droplets from their nose or mouth which may contain virus. If you are too close, you can breathe in the droplets, including COVID-19 if the person coughing has the disease.

##### ***(3) Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth***

Hands touch many surfaces and surface to hand transfer can spread the virus. Once contaminated, hands can transfer the virus to your eyes, nose or mouth. From there, the virus can enter your body and can make you sick.

##### ***(4) Practice respiratory hygiene***

Make sure you, and the people around you, follow good respiratory hygiene. This means covering your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze. If using tissues, you should dispose of the used tissue immediately and wash your hands. By following good respiratory hygiene, you protect the people around you from all viruses such as cold, flu and COVID-19.

##### ***(5) Face coverings and masks***

The use of face coverings is required in certain prescribed settings as outlined by the HSE. These are predominantly indoor settings and busy outdoor spaces where a lot of people gather. All players and backroom personnel should familiarize themselves with these settings and follow the additional advice contained elsewhere in this document.

##### ***(6) If you have fever, cough and difficulty breathing, seek medical care early.***

Call your GP or speak to your Team Doctor. DO NOT VISIT THE DOCTOR'S SURGERY OR GAA FACILITY. Stay home if you feel unwell. Follow the directions of your GP and public health service. This will protect you and help prevent spread of viruses.

### ***5. Health Questionnaire/Temperature Checks***

Prior to each training session or game, and until further notice, players and backroom personnel must complete the self-administered standard risk assessment health questionnaire which you can view [here](#) (A sample is also included as Appendix 1). Symptoms such as a high temperature, fever, cough, shortness of breath, and change in taste or smell will be identified.

**The presence of symptoms, or temperature (over 37.5°C) precludes attendance at training or games.** In such circumstances, the individual should telephone their GP or Team Doctor for advice and management.

**REMEMBER: Positive symptomatology or temperature over 37.5°C precludes attendance.**

In such circumstances, **THE GP SHOULD BE TELEPHONED** - DO NOT ATTEND SURGERY OR GAA FACILITIES.

MORE INDEPTH MEDICAL INFORMATION ON COVID-19 IS AVAILABLE ON THE GAA WEBSITE AT THE FOLLOWING LINK:

<https://www.gaa.ie/api/pdfs/image/upload/dbrquujnn6bwinpfl1u0.pdf>

## Section 2 – Basic Information for Players and Backroom Personnel

### 1. Close and Casual Contacts

#### Importance of 'Casual' vs. 'Close' contact

It is important to ensure insofar as is possible that playing and training activities allow Public Health to deem participants as 'Casual' rather than "Close" contacts in the event of a positive case of Covid within the team environment.

Failure to do so could result in an entire team or panel being forced to isolate for 14 days and ultimately their inability to fulfil fixtures and exclusion from a competition.

The success in 2020 of the Return to Play Protocols, and our ability to complete the games programme was largely predicated on the basis that contact between those involved was generally deemed 'Casual' and not 'Close' once all of the recommended control measures were adhered to.

This allowed reported incidents to be dealt with on an individual basis, without putting teams, officials or opponents in jeopardy from a contact tracing point of view.

More information on Close and Casual contacts is available from the HSE [here](#)

#### Potential 'Close' Contact scenarios

The following scenarios require careful planning and the implementation of strict control measures by those involved with inter county panels.

- Use of a Gym or other indoor training facility.
- Use of dressing rooms (including showers)
- Pre and Post match/training meals
- Meetings for tactical analysis or game preparation.
- Collectively travelling to and from games/training.
- Overnight accommodation

As a general rule, teams should avoid using indoor facilities where possible. Where this is not possible, the amount of time players, management and support teams spend together in a confined space (team meetings, travelling, in dressing rooms, in showers etc) should be controlled and minimised. Social distancing and hand hygiene should be practiced whenever possible, and masks as per national guidelines, should be used at all times in closed spaces.

All playing and backroom personnel must have completed the Health Questionnaire before each training session or game they are attending.

The protocols that follow have been developed on the basis that, insofar as is reasonably practicable, any contacts between players, mentors and support staff, will remain 'Casual' by definition.

## **2. Training Sessions**

Counties are strongly advised to **leave a clear 48 hours between collective sessions** – this will help significantly to limit infection risk and minimize potential close contact designation.

For this reason and in order to minimize risk generally, it is strongly advised that in 2021, collective training sessions are limited to no more than 3 per week (or 2 plus a game) for all Counties. If players are attending additional gym sessions individually or in small groups, they should ensure to follow the advice in part 3 (below) in relation to this.

Control measures for Training sessions should be conducted in line with the Safe Return to Gaelic Games document (available [here](#)). Each team returning to training will need to ensure that:

- a) This document has been circulated to all players and team personnel intending to return.
- b) Each team has a nominated Covid Supervisor who has completed the online education module (*Each County can create a 'Team' in Foireann which allows them to designate Supervisors and players. This will allow each Supervisor to review the Health Questionnaires submitted by each player. More information is available at: <https://learning.gaa.ie/covid19resources>*)
- c) All participants have, within the last 12 months, completed the Gaelic Games online education module available [here](#).
- d) A system is in place for completion of health questionnaires for each session and game – this applies to players, support personnel, county officers etc; in short anyone who is attending a training session. A link to the online Health Questionnaire is available [here](#).

All warm ups, at both Training and games, should be conducted outdoors. Indoor warm-up areas should not be used.

Training Camps involving overnight stays will not be permitted in 2021.

## **3. Gyms and Indoor Fitness Facilities**

As part of the Inter County Return to play process, County teams will be permitted to use available Gym facilities with strict public health protocols in place. . If gym work, or aspects of it, can be conducted outdoors, then risk of transmission of the virus is dramatically reduced. Ideally Gym activity indoors should be conducted on an individual basis or in very small groups

Where indoor gym activity is taking place, the following advice – taken from the Ireland Active Framework for Safe Operation - should be followed:

- Social distancing of 2m should always be maintained
- Participants should not congregate before or after activities, and facilities should design internal flows to reflect this.
- Facilities should plan for a maximum of 1 person/4 square metres\* (2mx2m) and in accordance with government advice on maximum capacities for indoor activities.

- Ensure adequate ventilation, avoiding recycling of air to avoid possibility of infection, in accordance with HSE/HSA guidance
- Carry out frequent cleaning of surfaces and wipe downs of contact surfaces with single use disinfectant wipes or strong disinfectants and microfibre cloths.
- Users should not share towels, water bottles etc.
- All of the standard infection control guidance from the HSE should be heeded.
- There should be no hands-on adjustments or physical contact during training sessions.
- Spacing of exercise machines/equipment should be undertaken to ensure 2m distance in between equipment. An alternative may be to use every second piece of equipment or the closing of certain stationary equipment to ensure 2m distancing.
- Equipment which is 2m apart should not be placed where exercisers are facing each other.
- Spin bikes should be staggered and spaced 2m apart to avoid spray back.
- Loose equipment such as dumbbells, kettlebells, free weights etc. should be used by one exerciser and cleaned in between each use by users/staff.
- Booking of time slots should be employed in order to enable safe management and recording of users in the facility.
- Where spotting of weights is being undertaken, face coverings should be worn

Current practices for fitness/training instruction should be reviewed by team management in accordance with the above and to limit and reduce the number of players and coaches in the gym at any one time.

Reservation and check-in/check-out systems should be implemented that will limit the number of players and coaching staff in the facility (employees should be included in the count).

All areas, within the gym, where social distancing is particularly challenging should be kept closed - Players should not enter the gym facility prior to their assigned reservation.

Adequate signage and reminders should be provided at entrances and in strategic places within the gym providing instruction on social distancing, hand hygiene, use of cloth face coverings or masks, and cough and sneeze etiquette.

The use of other indoor fitness facilities (such as sports halls) is strongly discouraged.

#### **4. Match Day Panel and Backroom Team Composition**

Guidance on numbers permitted to attend games being played behind closed doors (i.e. panel numbers and numbers of backroom personnel permitted) will be provided separately by the three Gaelic Games Associations ahead of a return to games and once clarity has been provided by Government in this context.

#### **5. Pre-match meal/meeting**

Teams should meet no more than 3 hours before scheduled game time for pre-match meal and game prep (e.g. neuromuscular activation). Where possible, teams should not gather indoors in a group for pre or post-match meals – ideally players should take their food and eat it alone.

It is recognized however that this may not always be possible – if groups are having a sit down meal, and again to minimise the risk of disease transmission, numbers should be reduced to an absolute minimum. Counties should consider whether individuals can eat at home and meet up 1 hour beforehand as an alternative. Numbers should at all times be in line with what can be facilitated to maintain appropriate social distancing.

Masks should be worn at all times indoors - meetings, bus, dressing rooms and pitch-side for support staff and substitutes (unless they are warming up or entering the game). The Team Manager/Maor Fóirne are not obliged to wear facemasks during a game but it is encouraged.

#### **6. Travelling to the Ground**

In order to minimize risk, players should travel to training individually, unless they are members of the same household.

If travelling by bus, the capacity of the bus should be **reduced to 25%** until further notice. Face coverings should be worn for the duration of the journey.

## **7. Match Day and Stadium Provisions**

Parking areas will be provided for all team personnel in proximity to the ground. Parking passes should be distributed in advance. Designated staggered arrival times are recommended for each team to avoid congestion at entry point.

A complete and accurate list of names must be provided to ground management and a designated entrance for players (and backroom staff) used to facilitate the accreditation process.

Designated and identifiable (usually stickers) seating will be provided for all substitutes and backroom officials at the ground in line with social distancing guidelines. Team dug outs are not to be used.

All warm-ups should be outdoors - Indoor warm up areas should not be used.

In order to reduce risk it is important to refrain from the following activities:

- Team huddles
- Team photographs
- Shaking hands with other players and personnel
- Celebrations and commiserations involving close physical contact

A designated isolation room will be available in each ground. Hand sanitising facilities should be available to all players, backroom staff and officials in all key areas.

Dressing rooms should be deep cleaned in line with public health guidance after each session and/or match.

## **8. Dressing Room Use**

Where teams can operate without using Dressing Rooms, they are strongly encouraged to do so. Where they cannot, time spent in dressing rooms should be minimised as should numbers occupying dressing rooms. Counties should consider the provision of out-door sheltered facilities which are fully ventilated to minimize time spent indoors during summer months (e.g. canopies/gazebos)

For training sessions, and if using dressing rooms, only venues where the relevant team will have access to two dressing rooms can be used.

On match days, only venues where four dressing rooms (2 per team) are available should be used for inter county games, unless by agreement one or other county decides not to utilize dressing rooms.

Dressing rooms should be vacated as soon as is practical post-match; post-match celebrations are not allowed in dressing rooms. If the same dressing rooms at a given venue are being used for more than one game (i.e. in the event of a double header), there should be a clear period of at least one hour between usage by different teams to allow for a deep clean of each dressing room and shower area.

### **9. Pitch-side**

Clearly marked Personal bottles, or Single-use bottles should be used for fluid intake.

Everybody (with the exception of the players on the field of play, those who are warming up and the Team Manager/Maor Fóirne) should be wearing face coverings.

Medics should be wearing gloves +/- plastic aprons

Designated Seating will be provided for all personnel in the arena (subs and backroom personnel)

### **10. Showers**

For the intercounty season, and where feasible, players are advised to shower at home. However, it is accepted, that this will not always be possible and thus alternative provisions should be in place.

The Covid relevant risks associated with showering can be significantly reduced if Players apply soap/sanitizer, enter the shower area for a short period, and exit in a single line. The rationale is that liberal application of soap/sanitizer and minimal time in the shower, while not eliminating the risk completely, reduces risk to acceptable levels. Entrance and egress to/from Shower facility should be supervised.

### **11. Management Team Kit/Accessories**

In general terms, each player should be responsible for his/her own gear when attending training or games. One member of the backroom team/coach should be designated in charge of cleaning and disinfecting of any shared equipment before, during and after all sessions/activities.

Jerseys or bibs should not be swapped during a training session or game and should be washed at the highest temperature after every use.

### **12. Swimming pools**

Collective Recovery sessions in swimming pools are not recommended for the 2021 season

### **13. Meals**

Where possible, teams should not gather indoors in a group for pre or post-match meals – ideally players should take their food and eat it alone. It is recognized however that this may not always be possible – if groups are having a sit down meal, and again to minimise the risk of disease transmission, numbers should be reduced to an absolute minimum and social distancing must be observed.

When eating after training, disposable plates or takeaway cartons should be available. Players should be served and not touch anything except their own plate.

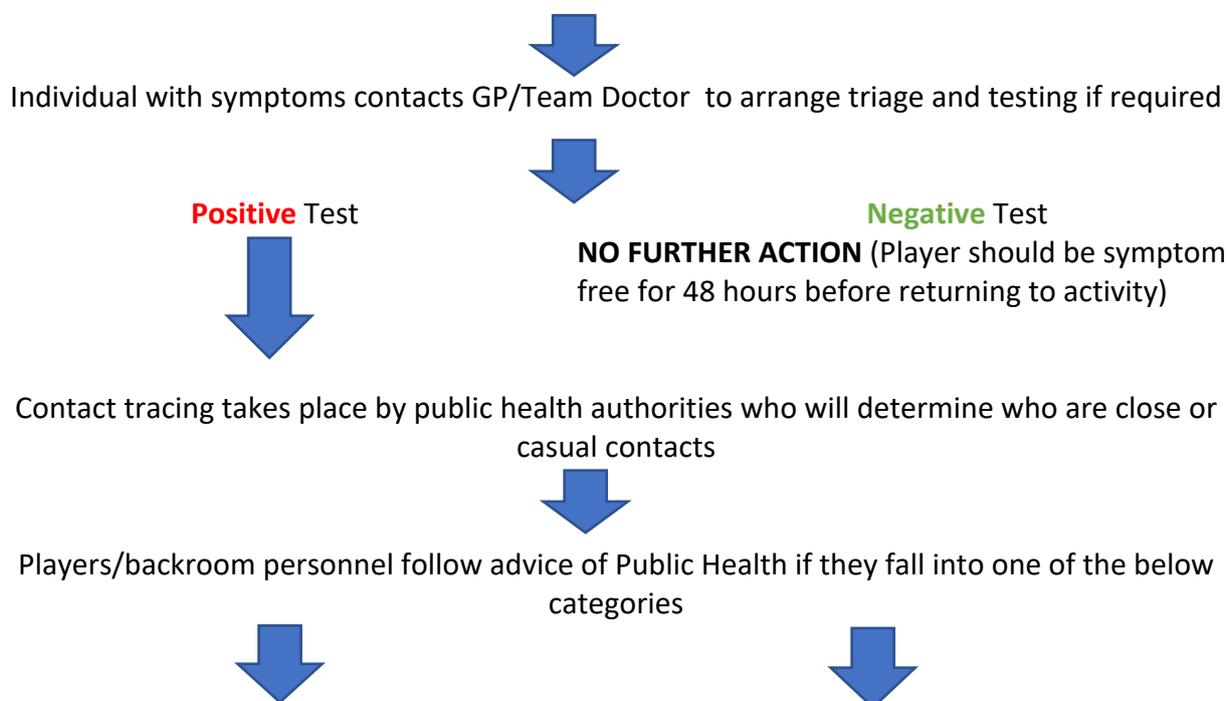
#### 14. Hotel Rooms

Where Hotel rooms are being used, it is important that the relevant facilities are following Fáilte Ireland guidelines for the management of Covid-19. Travelling team/management should have rooms, toilets and public areas that are restricted insofar as reasonably possible. Where teams are staying overnight, all players and backroom personnel should be accommodated in single rooms (Exception: members of the same household)

For purposes of reducing risk, teams should not stay overnight unless they are travelling more than 130 miles to a game.

#### 15. Dealing with positive symptomatology

If a player, match or team official displays positive symptoms he/she should refrain from further activities until the following steps have been undertaken



Close Contact	Casual Contact
Will be Tested Will undergo active follow up from Public Health You also need to restrict your movements (stay at home) for 14 days. You can stop restricting your movements when both apply: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You have a negative COVID-19 test (COVID-19 not detected) 10 days after you were last in contact with the person who tested positive.</li> <li>You do not have any symptoms of COVID-19.</li> </ul> <b>GAEILC GAMES INVOLVEMENT – None until medical assessment and clearance to return</b>	You may have been in contact with someone with COVID-19, but you do not meet the definition to be a close contact.  If you are a casual contact, you do not need to <a href="#">restrict your movements</a> . Continue to follow the advice on how to <a href="#">protect yourself and others</a> .  If you are a casual contact, you do not need to be tested  <b>GAEILC GAMES INVOLVEMENT – As normal as long as symptom free</b>

Further information on Close and Casual Contacts can be accessed on the HSE website [HERE](#)

### **16. Treatment of Players (Medical/Massage)**

Doctors, Physiotherapists or Massage Therapists, when treating players should follow the relevant guidelines for their profession.

As a general rule, where treatment is taking place indoors, it should be limited to two people (the practitioner and the player) with the practitioner ensuring to wear appropriate PPE and the player a mask.

### **17. Covid vaccinations**

While it is a matter for the individual participants involved, COVID vaccination is recommended for all in line with NIAC and HSE guidelines.

### **18. Testing**

As in 2020, the GAA will again have a rapid testing programme in place for when a player or backroom member tests positive in the week of a game. Further details on this will issue separately in due course.

In the interim, the advice outlined above on dealing with positive symptomatology should prevail.

### **19. Match Officials**

Separate and specific Return to Play advice will be provided to Match Officials from the GAA, LGFA and Camogie Associations.

### **20. Individual Responsibility**

It is emphasized that standard precautions are taken with regards to handwashing, social distancing, face coverings and that minimal time should be spent in confined spaces

All participants need to be aware that their activities, away from training or the field of play can impact on risk and therefore on the team as a whole. As with society in general, but most particularly in the context of the inter-county season, participants need to ensure, insofar as possible, that the number of “close contacts” in their daily lives should be kept to a minimum.

The continued good health of all of those involved and the successful completion of the 2021 Inter County season will depend on the discipline and commitment of all participants to following best practice both during their Gaelic Games activities and in their daily lives away from the game.