Lab Operations during COVID-19

We’ve heard a lot of guidance recently, so instead of reiterating it all, remember to look for the current recommendations on the [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov) and [The Association for Biosafety and Biosecurity](https://www.a1bb.org) websites. This guide provides steps that should be taken by researchers working in UF laboratories to mitigate potential hazards. Additional information on the administrative impact of COVID-19 on research can be found on UF Research’s webpage.

With less people in the labs, there are less eyes and ears to catch a problem. Train yourself to come into the lab space and take a few moments to pause and observe the environment. Does it sound the same as always? Is all equipment functioning normally? Has anything changed? Take the time to walk around to make sure nothing is amiss.

### PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

While working in the laboratory you should use the risk assessment--determined PPE for your processes. What about adding PPE to avoid getting COVID-19?

#### MASKS

Masks or cloth face coverings are required in public areas or shared spaces. Specific laboratories may require higher levels of protection, based on planned activities, laboratory configuration, and/or biosafety level requirements. Researchers may use either a disposable mask or cloth face coverings in the lab setting. If using a disposable mask, EH&S recommends a 3-ply surgical mask that meets ASTM Barrier 1 protection. Proper use of face mask is detailed in [this video](#).

- Use alcohol-based sanitizer or wash your hands before donning a face mask.
- Inspect the mask for holes or tears. Do not wear damaged or soiled masks. The filtration efficiency and protective ability of a face mask is compromised when the mask becomes wet, torn or dislodged.
- For a disposable mask, ensure the colored side faces outward.
- Find the top part where the metal piece or stiff edge is. Place it over your nose.
- Pull the mask down to cover mouth, nose, and chin.
- Tighten the nose piece and ensure there are no gaps between the mask and your face.
- Do not wear a mask for more than 3 continuous hours to prevent it from getting damp.*
- Always be sure to pay attention to your own medical signs (dizziness, difficulty breathing, headache) that may indicate that the mask is having an adverse effect on you.

* There is no set rule for how long a mask should be worn as it depends on humidity levels, respiration rate, nasal discharge, talking, etc. There are various studies that investigate the effectiveness of surgical masks over time in a surgical setting by measuring bacterial contamination of the surgical surface. Based on these studies, EH&S recommends continuous use of no more than 3 hours as a best practice.

#### OTHER PPE

- Wearing gloves should be done as prescribed in the lab but may not be as effective for avoiding exposure to SARS-COV-2. **A few reminders when working with gloves:**
  - Do not touch your face with contaminated hands.
Gloves might possibly get your attention before scratching your nose, but they are just changing the contamination from your hands to the gloves. **Always remove your gloves before leaving the lab.**

- Do not wear gloves outside of the lab. Handwashing is a more effective precaution to prevent the spread of disease than the use of gloves. As a standard lab practice, always wash your hands after removing gloves.

- Eye protection should always be worn in the laboratories for any procedures that could be hazardous to the eyes. In the case of COVID-19, eye protection is suggested as it may prevent you from touching your eyes with contaminated hands.

- Do not share PPE.

**REMOVING PPE**

If re-using disposable masks, follow these steps for safe mask storage:

- Before removing the mask, clean hands with alcohol-based sanitizer or soap and water.
- Remove the mask from behind using the strings or ear loops. Do not touch the front of the mask.
- Place it in a ventilated container such as a paper bag. Do not use a Ziploack bag since it does not allow moisture to escape. Ensure the container is labeled with your name and date of last use.
- Clean hands with alcohol-based sanitizer or soap and water.
- Let the mask sit for at least 72 hours before re-using it. Never share masks with someone else.
- Discard the mask if it becomes soiled or wet. Place the mask in a plastic bag and dispose of it in a regular trash bin.

Information on cloth face coverings can be found on the [CDC website](https://www.cdc.gov). Cloth face covering should be washed each day after use. Gloves and other PPE should be discarded or replaced as needed per standard lab practices.

**CLEANING**

Unless a person with known or suspected COVID-19 has been in an area, current CDC guidance does NOT recommend additional cleaning, disinfection or precautions for common community areas such as classrooms, laboratories, common sitting areas, meal rooms, etc. Routine cleaning of these areas is all that is necessary. However, facilities should establish a program of regular cleaning of common touchpoints, such as door handles, at least once per day. All personnel are encouraged to wash hands with soap and water or to use hand sanitizer after handling high-touch common-use areas.

Guidance for cleaning areas where a person with known or suspected COVID-19 has been present for 15 minutes or longer can be found [here](https://www.cdc.gov).

**ADDITIONAL MITIGATION STRATEGIES**

Your research is important, but so is the health of the research staff and the community at large. Exercising social distancing and keeping laboratory activities to a minimum can help us all get through this sooner and back to normal eventually. Always remember to:
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- Work in shifts to avoid agglomeration of people in labs/rooms. There should be no contact or overlap between the shifts to avoid potential cross contamination between groups.
- Keep at least a 6-foot distance between you and other people.
- Develop circular traffic patterns to prevent face-to-face contact between employees.
  Appropriately label flow direction with signs and arrows.
- Arranging seating to be forward facing instead of employees facing each other.
- Wash hands regularly following CDC guidelines. Wash hands when entering the lab, at regular intervals throughout the day, and before leaving the lab.
- Avoid touching your face.
- Stay home if you feel unwell or have any of the COVID-19 symptoms. Immediately report your symptoms to your supervisor and department so testing and contact tracing can begin.

SCHEDULING AND WORKING ALONE IN THE LAB

A daily briefing of what activities are to be performed should be discussed with the PI.

- Utilize a rotating schedule to maintain social distancing requirements. Entry and expected departure times should be predetermined for each shift. Do not overlap shifts. Communication between shifts should be done via phone calls or Zoom meeting.
- Each group must clean/disinfect their space at the start and end of each shift.
- UF IDs must always be displayed when on campus by utilizing a lanyard or badge.
- Ensure that individuals performing critical tasks have been adequately trained, have access to all PPE and essential safety equipment, and understand whom to contact with technical or safety questions.
- Laboratory supervisors are strongly encouraged to prohibit their employees from working alone in areas where hazardous materials, conditions, or processes are present. Supervisors who permit employees to work alone could require them to choose one of the following risk mitigation methods:
  o The lone employee shall arrange to call or text his/her supervisor or a designee on a periodic basis to check in and report their status. The supervisor must be located anywhere that is reliably reachable by phone.
  o The lone employee can arrange for another person inside the same building to physically stop by for a periodic wellness check. This method is particularly effective in areas where cell phone coverage is unreliable or where laboratory noise is substantial.
  o The lone employee can arrange to call or text a friend, colleague, or family member periodically to check in and report their status. The friend, colleague, or family member can be located anywhere that is reliably reachable by phone.
- Wellness checks, texts, and phone calls should be made at intervals not to exceed 2 hours for standard work.
- Report to University of Florida Police (352-392-1111) in the event of an emergency or inability to contact the lone worker.
• Safety requirements supersede any occupancy limits. **Employees must not attempt to perform any highly hazardous activities while working alone.** Examples of highly hazardous activities include, but are not limited to the use of:
  o Pyrophoric or water reactive chemicals
  o Explosive or potentially explosive chemicals materials
  o Acutely toxic materials

**WHAT IF SOMEONE WORKING IN THE LAB BECOMES SYMPTOMATIC OR TESTS POSITIVE FOR COVID-19?**

Address symptomatic employees by following these steps:

• Stay home if you have a fever or any of the COVID-19 symptoms.
• Contact your primary care provider for an evaluation.
• Stay home until results are received. Report results to your supervisor and your department’s HR liaison.

Address positive cases by following these steps:

• Report to your supervisor and the department’s HR liaison.
• Department or building manager to restrict access to room. The room should be locked and a sign placed on the door stating that access is forbidden.
• The department or building manager must contact Facilities Services/Work Management for space cleaning. Guidance for cleaning areas where a person with known or suspected COVID-19 has been present for 15 minutes or longer can be found here.
• The department or building manager will reopen the space once cleaning has been conducted.
• Appropriate agencies may conduct contact tracing.
• Do not return to work until you have met the requirements of the quarantine and return-to-workplace protocols provided by HR and/or your supervisor

More information can be found on the UFHR website. Questions regarding a known or suspected contact with COVID-19 positive individual within the workplace environment can be directed to the UF Health COVID-19 Exposure Hotline 352-273-9790.