

From spit to scrums: How can sports players minimize their coronavirus risk?

May 22 2020, by Philip Russo and Brett Mitchell



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As we emerge from lockdown, so does our sport. And many sporting bodies are grappling with the best way to do this while protecting their players, staff and fans from the coronavirus.

For instance, earlier this week, the International Cricket Council [said](#) using sweat to shine a cricket ball was OK, [but not saliva](#).

The Australian Institute of Sport goes even further. It [also bans](#) using sweat.

But how realistic is this and other well-meaning advice? How do you stay 1.5m apart in a rugby scrum? And have we seen the end of communal showers?

All sports need to change

The [SARS-CoV-2](#) coronavirus [is transmitted](#) via close contact with an infectious person, infectious droplets from coughs and sneezes, or contact with contaminated surfaces before touching your mouth or face.

So, all sports need to change how they operate by keeping these transmission methods in mind.

Transmission from person to person is [more likely inside](#) than outside; air changes dilute virus particles (the more air changes, the lower the risk).

For instance, a recent cluster of 112 COVID-19 cases in South Korea was linked to fitness dance classes held in [confined and closed spaces](#). So if any sport can be played outdoors, it should be.

If players need to be inside, it's best to avoid crowded and confined spaces. Players might want to change out of their kit or take a shower at home, rather than in a communal changing room.

minimizing the number of players and support staff who attend training and game days is also crucial. The fewer people around, the easier it is to

socially distance and the less potential for transmission.

Of course, if players or staff have come into close contact with a known or suspected case of COVID-19 or are unwell, they need to stay away. The Australian Institute of Sport [suggests](#) staying away if you've been unwell in the past 14 days.

Regular coronavirus testing may be possible in some [elite](#) sports. But for community sports, clubs might consider checking players' temperatures or being alert for symptoms, [such as](#) a high temperature, cough, sore throat or shortness of breath.

[Personal hygiene](#) is the other major intervention. Players should wash their hands before and after the game, and during breaks.

For most sports, handwashing with soap and water is best as this not only removes grime, the [soap also kills the virus](#). Alcohol-based hand sanitizers aren't as [effective](#) if your hands are visibly dirty.

Nevertheless, clubs should provide alcohol hand disinfectant stations throughout venues, for players, staff and fans.

Changing rooms need to be frequently cleaned, if used at all. Areas that are touched frequently (for instance, [door handles](#), taps, chairs, benches) need to be regularly and thoroughly cleaned.

Players need to keep their hands away from their face and cough into their elbow. And no sharing water bottles.

Scrums, pack marks are OK but group hugs are out

Contact sports present the biggest challenge. Close contact in rugby (think scrum), and AFL (pack marks) are crucial aspects of the game

and are unavoidable. So we need to think about minimizing contact elsewhere.

Keep physical contact to within playing the game and training. Avoid celebrating goals or victories with group celebrations and hugs. Keep 1.5m apart in team meetings and at half time. After the match, go home.

Balls, gloves, half-time fruit

We know the coronavirus survives on surfaces for varying length of times. Exactly how long depends on the temperature, humidity, how much of the virus is present (viral load) and the type of surface.

The good news is the virus can easily be killed.

So wash your balls. Yes, really. To minimize the risk of the virus passing between players, wash balls with common detergent as regularly as possible and dry them thoroughly before using them again. Have extra balls available to allow for this cleaning and drying.

Don't share equipment such as gloves, head protection, pads and bats. Each player should have their own, and ensure [players](#) clean them regularly.

As for shared food at half time, such as fruit or lollies, best to avoid these for now.

How about community sport and spectators?

Community sport is returning and so too will weekends spent ferrying the kids around to play.

But you'll still need to apply the same important principles—physical distancing (keeping 1.5m away from each other), hand hygiene before and after attending, and not attending if you or your kids are feeling unwell.

Where you need to attend, limit this to one parent or guardian.

Some find it hard to follow the rules

Of course, all these recommendations are useless if people don't follow them. We're already seen [several](#) highly publicized [breaches](#) of coronavirus guidelines in sport. So we need to keep vigilant.

We cannot reduce the risk of coronavirus transmission entirely. But these measures will reduce the risks sufficiently for us to once again enjoy our sport for now.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: From spit to scrums: How can sports players minimize their coronavirus risk? (2020, May 22) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-05-scrums-sports-players-minimize-coronavirus.html>

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