

Guidelines for Return to Sport as part of the COVID-19 transition in Malta

Introduction

The guidelines on the return to sport in Malta as part of the COVID-19 transition are intended for the sporting associations and athletes who fall under the supervision of SportMalta. They are based on international guidelines and scientific literature, and are in accordance with the guidance issued by the Public Health Authorities. They are intended to make sport as safe as possible while allowing athletes from a wide number of sports to return to training.

As COVID-19 restrictions are gradually relaxed, athletes, staff and other persons concerned must work together to adapt and promote safe sports practices consistent with advice from public health authorities and to ensure that venues are ready for the social distancing and correct hygiene measures that are critical to the success of the transition. Athletes and staff must prevent the transmission of COVID-19 while training, consistent with updated advice from the public health authorities. The health and safety of the athletes and staff involved is paramount, and the following guidelines are centred on ensuring that this is in no way compromised. The guidelines themselves are subject to change based on the evolving local scenario and are in no way intended to supersede the general guidelines issued by Public Health.

Athletes, staff and others must prepare for the possibility that there will be cases of COVID-19 at the sports venue and be ready to respond immediately, appropriately, effectively and efficiently, and consistent with specific recommendations from public health authorities.

Understanding how COVID-19 spreads

Current research suggests that the SARSCoV-2 virus (the virus that causes COVID-19) is transmitted from person to person:

- Through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks loudly.
- Between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 2 metres).

There is also a possibility that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the COVID-19 virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, and eyes.

Most persons infected with COVID-19 experience mild symptoms and recover. However, some people develop more serious complications and may require hospital care. Risk of serious illness increases with age, for people with weakened immune systems and people with conditions such as diabetes, heart and lung disease.

The pattern of breathing during strenuous exercise changes such that there is an increase in both the volumes of air that is breathed in and out, and of the number of breaths taken per unit time. As the rate of breathing increases, the potential of spraying out infected droplets from someone who unknowingly has COVID-19 is higher than under normal circumstances.

Research also suggests that due to strenuous exercise, as one breathes deeper, athletes exposed to virus particles would be more likely to inhale such particles and direct them to the lower areas of the lung.

General Principles

Mandatory Conditions for Sports Activities

These following obligatory conditions are issued under the Public Health Act Chapter 465 of the Laws of Malta and require strict adherence. Failure to adhere to these conditions will result in enforcement procedures as provided by these Act.

Social Distancing and hygiene

Limiting face-to-face contact with others is the best way to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Social distancing is one of the best tools to avoid exposure. This means keeping space between oneself and other people outside of the home. This document outlines general hygiene principles which athletes should adhere to, as well as the proper use of a facemask. It also summarises what to do in the case of symptoms or suspected cases of COVID-19.

Entry to Venues

A general guidance for venues explains that entry will only be allowed for authorised persons who have ideally pre-booked either via telephone or online. A log of bookings with name, telephone number and time of arrival should be kept for a minimum of 4 weeks. Temperature checks on all persons will be carried out at the entry to venues, and entry will be refused to any individual either displaying or complaining of symptoms, not wearing a facemask, or having a temperature of over 37.2°C. Appropriate hand sanitizer (minimum 70% alcohol) needs to be provided at entry and exit points

Venue management

Social distancing measures are to be strictly adhered to inside the venues and venues will be responsible for ensuring frequent disinfection of surfaces and the appointment of a person responsible for ensuring public health measures are followed. No spectators will be allowed to enter the venue.

Venues that have outdoor restaurants/snack-bars who have a restaurant license will be able to open in accordance with the guidelines issued by Public Health and the Malta Tourism Authority for outdoor catering establishments. However no other common areas, such as clubhouses and indoor games, will be allowed to operate.

Venues will not be allowed to open changing rooms or shower facilities and athletes are therefore required to shower at home.

General Principles

Athletes

General guidance for athletes is given in terms of social distancing, personal hygiene and behaviour. This is a reminder of their responsibility in terms of the current Public Health directives. A healthy diet is also highlighted as a key area.

Medical Staff

Medical staff providing care at any facilities operated by SportMalta are reminded of the risks associated with COVID-19 and are directed to the latest guidelines issued by the European Resuscitation Council. This is deemed essential reading for anyone providing first aid or other medical care at sporting venues.

Return to Sport

General guidance is given on returning to sport in a way which minimises the risk of injury when returning to training and attention is drawn to the fact that any athletes returning to sport after a period of home exercise, will need to start training at a lower intensity than their maximum, in accordance with the guidance issued by their coaching staff and physical trainers.

What Sports are Permitted?

A crucial aspect of the guidelines issued, in liaison with Public Health, is the fact that only outdoor, non-contact sport will be allowed. There is guidance for individual sports, which may be indoor sport for example, and which can be adapted to training outdoors and without contact. All sports activities must be strictly individual training, with no competition or games.

Masks

General face protection using a mask or visor is encouraged when around other people while not practicing sport. A face mask should be worn close to the face. The mask should not be touched or moved with the hand from outside. The mask should cover mouth AND nose. If the mask is damp or contaminated with secretions, it must be changed immediately. After changing or removing the mask, the mask must be disposed of immediately and hand disinfection must always be performed. If a reusable mask is worn, it should be washed at 60°C afterwards and disposed of after a number of recommended washes.

Masks should not be used when practicing strenuous or vigorous exercise. Masks or visors are only recommended to be worn if a sport which does not involve vigorous exercise is practiced in the vicinity of other people.

General Guidelines for Venues

1. All persons (athletes and staff using any SportMalta and other sports facilities) should be informed of compliance with the basic hygiene measures (hand disinfection, coughing and sneezing etiquette, distancing, face masks etc.) in accordance with the instructions of Public Health and the relevant hygiene officer.
2. Inform athletes and staff with access to the venue/facilities about the definition of "infection symptoms" and what to do in case of occurrence
3. Designated entry attendant regulates access to the venue for players and compulsory staff.
4. Entry attendant asks other access persons about Health status and measures body temperature (thermal imaging).
5. Keep hand disinfectant (minimum 70% alcohol) available in front of or in each room if possible as well as at each entry and exit point as well as on training grounds.
6. Regular surface disinfection.
7. Leave doors/gates/windows as open as possible and avoid touching the door handles.
8. Markings for queuing 2m apart at entrance wherever necessary.
9. If required, food should be prepared beforehand and brought to the venue ready to eat. Do not hire external catering. If restaurant/snack bar with a restaurant license is available, it may operate in accordance with the guidelines issued by Public Health and the Malta Tourism Authority for outdoor catering establishments.
10. Exclusive use of individual drink bottles, absolutely no shared bottles or cups allowed.
11. Use of the common rooms (e.g. changing rooms and showers) not allowed.
12. Showering at home is obligatory (to avoid steam as a possible conductor of viruses / aerosol generator)
13. Medical staff to work with mask or visor, hand disinfection and disposable gloves and are responsible for hygiene in the medical premises- for use in emergency only.
14. Limit the use of toilet facilities as much as possible, ensuring regular disinfection and provision of paper towels instead of dryers. Absolutely no hair dryers.
15. Persons who have contact with several athletes should pay particular attention to hygiene and protective measures.
16. IMPORTANT: Exemplary individual behaviour with regard to hygiene and isolation measures both inside and outside the venue is a must, this includes an absolute ban on spitting or clearing of phlegm during the sport itself.
17. Overall, care should be taken to ensure that only those persons from the coaching staff or venue staff who are essential enter any venues. Persons who are not essential for the direct course of the sport can be contacted via telephone and video calls.
18. Personnel requirements
 - Association and/or venue hygiene officer
 - Increase in cleaning personnel
 - Entry attendant /accreditation system/regulation service
 - Stadium infrastructure requirements
 - Separate doping control rooms (if necessary)
 - Isolation room (in event of active or suspected case)
19. Material requirements
 - Hand disinfectants
 - Surface disinfectants
 - Facemasks
 - Personal bottles for drinks
20. The individual arrival of athletes in their own car should be strongly recommended, if possible with not more than two persons per car.
21. Facemasks should be worn (obligatory) up until the point at which practicing sport commences.
22. Arrival to venues should be staggered if possible.
23. Congregation in common areas is to be prohibited and social distancing practiced at all times.
24. Likewise there will be no handshakes, no team photographs or other unnecessary contact.
25. Adhere to hygiene principles issued by Public Health in terms of life outside sports. This includes amongst other things, not receiving visitors at home, regular disinfection of surfaces and shopping etc.

Conditions for Outdoor, Non-Contact Sport

Conditions for All Sports:

- No more than a *maximum* of 6 persons forming a group at any time, such as 6 persons training together or 5 persons training with 1 coach.
- Spatial separation of athletes should be kept to a minimum of 3m for all sports except for a few exceptions where the minimum distance is 2m.
- Athletes are to stick to training in groups of the same 5 or 6 individuals throughout all their training sessions, and not switch groups for any reason.
- Coaches should be considered part of the group (if present) and should keep a distance of 3m as well as wearing a facemask.
- No sharing of equipment is allowed
- The total number of persons allowed in the venue should amount to not more than 1 persons per 20 square metres of usable training space.

Specific Requirements for Individual non-Contact Outdoor sports:

Athletics :

- Distance of at least 3m to be maintained
- Avoiding running in other athletes' slipstreams is strongly recommended
- Drink stations should be avoided if possible
- No relays
- Disinfection necessary for high jump & pole and all apparatus in track and field events
- Alternate lanes. This must be strictly adhered to.

Archery

- No sharing of equipment
- 1 person per lane, minimum of 2m spacing between lanes
- Facemask or visor should be worn if possible

Bowls and Bocci

- No sharing of equipment
- Regular wiping of bowls between play
- Facemask or visor should be worn if possible

BMX

- Distance of at least 3m to be maintained
- Avoiding riding in other athletes' slipstreams is strongly recommended

Conditions for Outdoor, Non-Contact Sport

Specific Requirements for Individual non-Contact Outdoor sports:

Canoe

- 1 person per canoe
- Minimum 3m distance between canoes

Car Racing

- 1 person per car
- No sharing of equipment
- Helmet should be worn if possible
- Support team must observe social distancing of 2m, maximum of 5 people allowed.

Climbing

- No sharing of equipment
- Solo-climbing is strongly recommended
- Regular cleaning of equipment

Cycling

- Bicycles should not be shared, no tandem bicycles allowed.
- Minimum 3m distance to be kept and avoidance of cycling in another athlete's slipstream.

Dressage

- Individual saddles to be used
- Minimum distance of 3m to be kept, avoid riding in another rider's slipstream

Fishing

- Minimum distance of 3m to be kept between individuals
- Facemask or visor should be worn if possible

Golf

- Individual play is recommended
- No sharing of balls or other equipment is allowed
- Consider filling hole to allow easy extraction of golf ball without touching sides

Horse Racing

- No sharing of saddles
- 3m distance to be kept, avoid riding in slipstream if possible.
- No competition allowed

Model Aircrafts

- 3m distance to be kept
- Use of facemask or visor is encouraged

Conditions for Outdoor, Non-Contact Sport

Specific Requirements for Individual non-Contact Outdoor sports:

Sailing (at sea)

- Dinghy sailing – solo sailing only
- Maximum crew on keel boats: 2 persons on <30 feet; 4 persons on 30-40 feet; 6 persons on >40 feet
- 3m distance still applies to sailors on a boat
- Facemasks are encouraged

Scuba Diving (at sea)

- No sharing of equipment. Thorough disinfection of equipment prior to and after use is imperative
- Groups of no more than 6 divers are to be allowed
- Social distancing (2m) still applies while on boats, meaning vessel must be large enough to accommodate this

Shooting

- Use of alternate lanes
- No sharing of equipment. Equipment is to be thoroughly disinfected prior to and after use,
- Use of facemask or visor is encouraged when possible

Skate Boarding

- Minimum distance of 3m to be kept
- Avoid skating in another individuals slipstream

Surfing (at sea)

- Minimum distance of 3m to be kept
- Avoid surfing in another individuals slipstream

Swimming (in chlorinated water or at sea)

- Maximum of 3 swimmers per lane for 25m pool, 4 for 33m pool, 6 for 50m pool.
- Swimmers must start from opposite ends every alternate lane.
- Maintain general rule of 5 athletes + coach, across
- Chlorinated water is to be kept above 0.5mg/l Free Chlorine
- Starting times staggered to avoid congregation of athletes at end of pool

Tennis

- If possible done in the same pairs rather than allowing alternating partners
- Singles tennis is preferable to doubles
- Social distancing of 3m is still applicable.
- Balls may be marked with an X or a O indicating which individual is allowed to handle them

Triathlon

- Staggered starting times to avoid congestion at changing areas
- Minimum distance of 3m between athletes to be observed
- Avoid other athletes' slipstreams
- Drink stations should be avoided if possible (athletes to bring their own bottles)
- No sharing of equipment

Conditions for Outdoor, Non-Contact Sport

Specific Requirements for other sports to be practiced outdoors individually and with no contact:

Gymnastics

- Apparatus to be moved outdoors
- Apparatus must be thoroughly disinfected between use.
- Minimum distancing of 3m applies

Combat sports

- Participants should bring their own mats and equipment, no sharing of equipment
- Any apparatus to be moved outdoors
- Apparatus must be thoroughly disinfected between use and if possible to be used outdoors.
- Individual training only, strictly non-contact
- Minimum distancing of 3m applies

Fencing

- Social distancing of 3m applies
- Any equipment should be thoroughly disinfected prior to and after use, no sharing

Kendo

- Social distancing of 3m applies
- Any equipment should be thoroughly disinfected prior to and after use, no sharing.
- Any mats needed should be brought by the individual

Fitness Classes

- Social distancing of 3m applies
- 1 instructor and 5 persons
- Any equipment should be thoroughly disinfected prior to and after use, no sharing allowed.
- Bodyweight exercise should be encouraged
- Participants should bring their own mats and equipment

Rowing

- Should be practiced individually if possible, maximum of 2 people per boat.
- Social distancing of 3m applies
- No indoor simulation

Table Tennis

- Equipment to be disinfected prior to and after use, no sharing.
- Singles only
- Balls should be marked with an X or and O and each set only be touched by one player

Synchronised Swimming (in chlorinated pool)

- As per swimming guidelines above
- No group routines or contact allowed, individual routines only while maintaining 3m social distancing.

Chess and Scrabble can be played virtually.

Conditions for Outdoor, Non-Contact Sport

Specific Requirements for Team Sports to be practiced outdoors individually and with no contact. Strictly training and drills, no games, maintaining 3m distancing between athletes at all times:

Baseball

- Ball to be disinfected prior to use and every 15min
- Consider disinfecting ball and bat before every pitch
- Alternatively use pitching machine for practice
- Individual practice is encouraged where possible

Cricket

- Absolutely no shining of the ball
- Ball to be disinfected prior to use and every 15min
- Ideally ball is disinfected before every pitch
- Alternatively use bowling machine for practice
- Individual practice is encouraged where possible
- No sharing of equipment

Canoe Polo

- Distance of 3m to be observed
- No sharing of equipment
- Chlorinated pool water is to be kept above 0.5mg/l Free Chlorine
- Ball to be disinfected prior to use and every 15min

Horse Polo

- Distance of 3m to be observed
- Ball to be disinfected prior to use and every 15min

Volleyball (including beach volley)

- Ball to be disinfected before use and every 15min
- Consider disinfecting ball between each play
- Social distancing of 3m applies, limiting number of players to 1x1 with a net or 2x2 without a net.

Basketball

- Ball to be disinfected prior to use and every 15min
- Ideally disinfected between plays
- Strictly non-contact

Football

- Ball to be disinfected prior to use and every 15min
- Ideally disinfected between plays
- Strictly non-contact

Handball

- Ball to be disinfected prior to use and every 15min
- Ideally disinfected between plays
- Strictly non-contact

Team sports may only train for technique, speed, reaction, ball handling and other drills – Strictly no games and no contact are allowed.

Conditions for Outdoor, Non-Contact Sport

Specific Requirements for Team Sports to be practiced outdoors individually and with no contact. Strictly training and drills, no games, maintaining 3m distancing between athletes at all times:

Hockey

- Ball to be disinfected prior to use and every 15min
- Ideally disinfected between plays
- Strictly non-contact
- No sharing of equipment

Netball

- Ball to be disinfected prior to use and every 15min
- Ideally disinfected between plays
- Non-contact rules to be implemented until restrictions change

Rugby

- Non-contact to be practiced until restrictions change
- Ball to be disinfected prior to use and every 15min
- Ideally disinfected between plays

Waterpolo

- Ball to be disinfected prior to use and after use
 - Non-contact rules
 - 50m pool may be divided into 3 sections which can then be subdivided into 3 sub-sections allowing a maximum of 5 players per section and coach on the outside wearing a facemask (middle sub-section of middle section not to be used). A buffer lane is required between sections.
 - 25m pool may be divided into 2 sections with a buffer lane in between. These may be further subdivided into 2 sub-sections with the same 5+1 rule as above.
 - Chlorinated pool water is to be kept above 0.5mg/l Free Chlorine
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- Masks or visors are recommended to be worn if a sport is does not involve vigorous exercise, when there are other athletes around.

Final Thoughts

SportMalta have always valued “Integrity, Transparency and Accountability” and we believe that restarting sport in Malta should be a priority, particularly given the known benefits of exercise in preventing diseases related to worse outcomes in patients with the COVID-19 virus, but not at the cost of an increase in transmission of COVID-19.12

We are confident that if followed correctly, these guidelines allow for the safe return of athletes to their sports, albeit with a number of restrictions, however we hope that they herald the first step to the eventual resumption of normal sporting activity on these Islands.

Duties of venue as employer, venue staff & athletes

Employers are expected to take care of the health, safety and welfare of workers, including themselves, and all other staff, including contractors and delivery persons as well as athletes. This includes providing and maintaining a work and training environment that is without risk to health and safety, providing adequate and accessible facilities for the welfare of workers to carry out their work and monitoring the health of workers and the conditions of the workplace for the purpose of preventing illness or injury. Employers must minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19 of workers and athletes/customers by taking reasonable and practical measures to mitigate risk.

Protection of workers from the risk of exposure to COVID-19 may include, for example:

- ✓ Requiring workers to practice social distancing
- ✓ Requiring workers to practice good hygiene (e.g., through workplace policies and ensuring access to adequate and well stocked hygiene facilities)
- ✓ Requiring workers to stay home when sick
- ✓ Cleaning the workplace regularly and thoroughly
- ✓ Implementing working from home arrangements for those aspects of the business where such arrangements can be applied

Sports facilities must take actions to ensure that they do not put the health and safety of clients, customers, contractors and delivery persons at risk of contracting COVID-19. Such protection from the risk of exposure to COVID-19 may include, for example:

- ✓ Requiring them to practice social distancing, including through contactless deliveries and payments
- ✓ Requiring them to practice good hygiene, and
- ✓ Requiring others to stay away from the workplace, unless essential, e.g., such as family, friends and visitors.

Employers must maintain a safe work environment by, for example:

- ✓ Cleaning the workplace regularly and thoroughly,
- ✓ Restructuring the layout of the workplace to allow for social distancing,
- ✓ Limiting the number of people inside collective accommodation establishments at any given time,
- ✓ Providing adequate facilities to protect workers, as much as possible from contracting COVID-19 such as:
 - o Toilet facilities including adequate supply of soap, water and paper towels
 - o Hand sanitisers around the workplace, where it is not possible for workers to wash their hands,
 - o Staff rooms (where applicable) that are regularly cleaned and that allow for social distancing,
- ✓ Providing workers with regular breaks to use sanitizing facilities, particularly to allow workers to wash their hands, or to access hand sanitiser where this is not possible,
- ✓ Providing information, training, instruction and supervision which may include:
 - o guidance on how to properly wash hands
 - o training on how to fit and use any necessary personal protective equipment (PPE)
 - o training on adequate cleaning practices throughout the day
 - o instructions on how to set up a safe home workplace for those working from home, and
- ✓ Providing workers with instructions on staying home from work if sick.

Employers have the duty to consult with workers on health and safety matters relating to COVID-19. Employers must give workers the opportunity to express their views and raise their concerns. Workers are most likely to know about the risks of their work. Involving them will help build commitment to any changes that employers need to implement. Employers must advise workers of the outcome of consultation. Adapting collective accommodation establishments to manage and mitigate the risk of exposure to COVID-19 requires a thorough risk assessment. These guidelines provide considerations that employers must make when deciding on control measures such as restrictions within collective accommodation establishments to allow for social distancing, the adequacy of facilities for proper personal hygiene, cleaning arrangements, working from home arrangements, and other changes that may affect the health

and safety of workers. Consultation does not require consensus or agreement, but employers are strongly advised to allow workers to be part of the decision-making process for COVID-19 related matters.

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