

What is the goal of the ISC COVID-19 advisory board?

The goal of the ISC COVID-19 advisory board is to provide ISC coaches and staff advice on COVID-19 precautions that balance player safety while providing the best possible soccer experience for player development. Our focus is to utilize the current understanding of COVID-19 transmission to provide advice on risk management that is specific to the experiences of our club.

How has the response to COVID-19 at ISC compared to other local, state, and national youth sports clubs?

ISC has been extraordinarily proactive with seeking out advice about COVID-19 precautions. The club director Jon Cook formed the COVID-19 advisory panel in March of 2020. The initial meeting was attended by club directors from other soccer clubs in eastern Iowa, but only ISC has continued to regularly meet with the advisory panel. Jon's leadership on this issue has been noticed both at the state and national level. One original member was instrumental in developing the COVID-19 precautions for Iowa Soccer Association in 2020 and two members wrote the indoor soccer recommendation tool for USA soccer. In addition, ISC has been significantly more cautious than the majority of youth sports programs in Johnson County and across the state.

Is indoor soccer practice and play worth the risk of COVID-19 transmission?

The only way to eliminate the potential for COVID-19 spread during indoor practice and play is to cancel our indoor season. However, cancelling indoor soccer would negatively impact our player's physical and mental health and would be a major financial burden on ISC that could impact its long-term viability. Thus, the COVID-19 advisory panel unanimously agrees that the rewards of moving forward with an indoor soccer season far outweigh the potential for lower COVID-19 transmission in our club and community. With the decision to have an indoor season, the focus shifts to managing the potential risk of COVID-19 transmission with providing a soccer experience that is beneficial to player development.

What are the recommended COVID-19 precautions for indoor practice and play at ISC?

ISC has the following COVID-19 indoor policies for the 2021-2022 indoor season: 1) We expect that all spectators at the indoor games will wear masks. We ask that spectators do not attend practices. 2) We recommend that coaches wear masks during close contact with players but do not expect them to wear masks during practice and games when they are socially distanced from players. 3) Although we encourage and support mask usage by our players during practice and games, we will not require mask usage, 4) We expect that all spectators, players, and coaches will wear masks when entering and exiting the indoor facility. 5) We encourage spectators, players, and coaches to limit their time in the facility before and after practice and games.

How do the ISC COVID-19 precautions align with recommendations from the CDC, local school districts, and other local club sports?

The ISC COVID-19 precautions are less restrictive than the CDC guidance for sports, which currently recommends that people do not engage in close-contact sports with people that do not live with them. As stated above, the COVID-19 advisory panel unanimously agrees that this advice is too restrictive. Our precautions are similar to the current guidelines for sports at the Iowa City Community School District, which requires spectators to wear masks, but does not require players to wear masks during practice and games. To the best of our knowledge, our precautions are more restrictive than other local school districts (other than ICCSD) and most youth sports club practices and games, where there are no mask requirements for spectators or players.

What are the reasons for the mask recommendations for players?

Our current guidelines for masks for our players are that although we encourage and support mask usage by our players during practice and games, we will not require mask usage. The ISC COVID-19 advisory panel understands that this goes against the guidelines of the CDC, which recommends to not participate in close-contact sports, and the American Association of Pediatrics, which recommends face masks during games for indoor sports in areas with high transmission regardless of player vaccine status. The ISC COVID-19 advisory panel felt these guidelines are too restrictive for several reasons: 1) these guidelines are focused entirely on theoretical player safety without considering the benefits of participation and the unique features of soccer and our local facility, 2) these guidelines dismiss the impact of masks on player performance and comfort, and 3) these guidelines are not aligned with the policy of our local school districts and other youth sports organizations.

We would like to provide more context for the statements in the previous paragraph. As we described previously, the COVID-19 advisory panel unanimously agrees that the rewards of moving forward with an indoor soccer season far outweigh the potential for lower COVID-19 transmission in our club and community. We strongly believe that the CDC guidance is too restrictive, a stance that is supported by all other local schools and sports clubs. That leads to the question of why we encourage but do not require masks for players during practice and games. Although it would seem logical that soccer play would increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission, several large studies have not supported this idea. There have been two large studies of potential for transmission in soccer: The first focused on youth soccer in the US during the summer of 2020 (1) and the second focused on youth and professional soccer in Germany from August of 2020 to March of 2021 (2). These studies are extremely large, with 100,000+ players and thousands of training events and matches. In both studies, the authors found that there were no cases of transmission that could be tied directly to play. The caveat of these studies is that they primarily focused on outdoor soccer and occurred before the delta variant surge. However, to the best of our knowledge, there are no small case epidemiological case reports of transmission of COVID-19 during indoor soccer play. Any transmission that could be linked to a soccer team occurred outside of play in team meetings, team parties, or during carpooling. This low transmission rate has been attributed to a couple of features of soccer. First, there is little close contact between participants in soccer. The German study performed video monitoring of play to show that close contact between players averages 32 seconds per match (2), which is too short of a time to transmit COVID. Second, indoor soccer facilities are larger and generally well ventilated. Members of the ISC COVID-19 advisory panel helped develop a risk tool for indoor soccer for USA Soccer (<https://www.ussoccer.com/playon/guides/indoor-considerations>). According to these guidelines, which were developed before widespread vaccination, we can safely fit ~60 players in the Hawkeye Field at the HTRC, which is below the normal capacity during practice and games. There is more evidence of transmission in basketball, hockey, and wrestling, since these sports have more long-term close contact in poorly ventilated arenas. There have been suspected instances of transmission during play in Johnson county due to youth basketball. But even in these sports, it appears that most of the transmission that occurs in a team can be linked to meetings or team gatherings. Based on this data, the ISC COVID-19 advisory panel feels that the risk of transmission during soccer play is extremely low.

Beyond transmission risk, our players get the most out of practice and play if they can perform well and feel as comfortable as possible at the end of practice or games. So, we must ask whether masks have an impact on performance and comfort during highly aerobic activity. For this question, the science is clear, mask wearing during athletic activity has no long-term health effects but does substantially alter short-term metabolic function and performance. There were two studies published about 8 years ago looked at responses in patients taking a standard exhaustion stress test with or without a mask (3,

4). They did not observe differences in blood oxygenation at the end of the study, but they did see increased heart (~10 beats/min) and respiratory (~3-5 breaths/min) rates and transcutaneous CO₂. It is clear subjects adapted to reduced breathing by increasing heart and respiratory rates to maintain blood oxygenation. Another study looking at acute performance measured metabolic and blood chemicals directly after completing a 50 m or 400 m run, either masked or unmasked (5). When their performance was compared, masked runners had a drop of 2% in blood oxygenation, increased blood glucose and lactate levels, and increase perceived difficulty. Importantly, their performance was reduced, with 10-20% longer times for the runs. Several other recent studies have looked at spirometry results during exercise in masked versus unmasked individuals (6, 7). These studies show that lung function is reduced, perceived effort is increased, oxygen consumption is lower, and inspiratory and expiratory times are increased in masked performance. These studies show that masks do make it harder to breath, causing reduced performance and increased discomfort. Many of our children have said that masks cause them to not perform as well, makes it harder to catch their breath, and are more tired after practice and games. Again, the evidence suggests that COVID transmission during soccer play is minimal and the HTRC is a safe facility, so mask wearing during practice or play will only minimally reduce transmission risk. When the impact of mask wearing on the player was weighed against the potential impact on transmission, the ISC COVID-19 advisory panel did not feel the science supported a mask mandate that would need to be enforced by ISC coaches. ISC coaches will support players who chose to wear masks and the ISC COVID-19 advisory board encourages unvaccinated players to wear masks, but we feel that it is critical that the coaches focus on instruction rather than policing mask adherence. The ISC COVID-19 advisory panel also believes that we should align our mask mandates with the most restrictive local sports organization ICCSD, which requires spectators to wear masks but does not require masks for players during practices and games.

What are the reasons for the mask recommendations for coaches?

We recommend that coaches wear masks during close contact with players but do not expect them to wear masks during practice and games when they are socially distanced from players. There is a heightened risk of transmission during close contact with players and coaches. Thus, we recommend that the coaches wear masks when they coach the players as a group before and after games. However, we do not recommend that coaches wear masks during play. Our reasoning for this recommendation is that a fully vaccinated coach who is staying socially distanced from the players during play in a large playing environment with good ventilation poses little risk of transmission. Based on experiences from the first indoor games, wearing masks significantly reduces coaching due to reduced communication of the coach to the player. The masks muffle the coaches, especially with the background noise in the HTRC during games. Our players get the most out of the activity if they can receive understandable feedback from coaches. The ISC COVID-19 advisory board feels that the minor reduction in transmission risk with in-game mask wearing by the coaches does not outweigh the cost in coaching efficiency.

What are the reasons for the mask expectations for spectators?

ISC expects that all spectators at the indoor games will wear masks. Because spectators sit relatively close to each other for an extended period, transmission risk for spectators is much higher than for players and coaches during practice and games. Since masks cause no significant impact on breathing for spectators, the ISC COVID-19 advisory panel expects that all spectators will help reduce transmission and wear masks during the game. Based on the first weekend of the games, the majority of spectators were wearing masks.

What times during indoor practice and play pose the highest risk for COVID-19 transmission?

The risk of COVID-19 transmission is highest before and after games. We want to emphasize that the ISC COVID-19 advisory panel believes strongly that mask wearing during low aerobic in public setting is a vital public health measure that will help to limit the spread of COVID-19. We strongly encourage everyone to do their part and wear a mask while entering and exiting the building. We also encourage everyone to limit interactions in the indoor facility and ask that spectators not be present during practices unless necessary. Finally, we encourage each family to limit the number of spectators at the game for the first session, especially for age groups with unvaccinated kids. We feel that the benefits of reduced COVID-19 transmission by universal mask wearing when not practicing or playing, limiting the number of spectators, and reducing indoor interactions outweigh the minor inconveniences of these expectations. We understand that following these recommendations is a choice to be made by each family, but we ask that everyone do their part to reduce transmission.

References:

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