

Officials urge regular COVID-19 testing as key to success for schools, athletes amid increase in cases

All sports participants strongly encouraged to test weekly; all students not in sports strongly encouraged to test every two weeks

Middle, high schools advised to offer on-site testing to spur student participation

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Seeking to slow the spread of COVID-19 and buy more time to vaccinate more Minnesotans, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) in partnership with the Minnesota Department of Education today issued updated guidance to support COVID-19 testing for students in middle and high school as well as any Minnesotans participating in organized sports. Reflecting ongoing concerns about the potential of sports and other group activities to contribute to COVID-19 transmission, the state is now urging athletes, coaches, referees, volunteers and other participants to get tested for COVID-19 on a weekly basis. Students not participating in sports or other group activities are still strongly encouraged to test every two weeks. The guidance comes as Minnesota is experiencing increased community spread of COVID-19 and an especially high circulation of variants. Health officials now estimate that 60% of all COVID-19 cases in Minnesota are associated with the B.1.1.7 variant, a more transmissible version of the virus that may be associated with more severe symptoms. Much of the spread of COVID-19 in recent weeks has been seen in younger Minnesotans, particularly among middle and high school. Over the past month, more people are being admitted to hospitals and intensive care units to treat COVID-19, and the average age of hospital admission is trending younger (59 years) than during November and December surge (69 years).

“The last month plus has been very worrisome – especially among younger Minnesotans,” said Minnesota Commissioner of Health Jan Malcolm. “Just this week we saw the number of school-related COVID-19 cases in students exceed the high set in November during the fall surge. We are making encouraging progress with vaccinations, but there are still many Minnesotans who are susceptible and we need to do what we can to slow the spread. In addition to vaccinations,

COVID-19 testing is an important complementary tool to limit the damage of this disease. By testing and catching cases before they spread, we give schools and students the best chance for in-person learning, full sports seasons, and other activities that are so important.”

To encourage the regular testing that is most beneficial to limit spread, the Minnesota Department of Education is encouraging Minnesota middle and high schools to make COVID-19 testing more accessible for students by offering testing options onsite.

“Our schools are making tremendous efforts to keep our students, staff and families safe and healthy,” said Dr. Heather Mueller, Minnesota Commissioner of Education. “The ability to offer COVID-19 testing through our middle and high schools is one more tool to ensure our students can continue safely learning in-person.”

The state will provide free COVID-19 saliva test kits for any middle school, high school and organized sports team through the state’s partnership with Vault Health. Students are also currently able to send their Vault at-home tests back to the lab through their schools. In addition to testing, it is critical that Minnesotans remain vigilant about the other tried-and-true protective measures of masking up, social distancing, and staying home when sick.

“We’re not at the end of this pandemic yet, but we’re getting closer every day,” said MDH Assistant Commissioner Dan Huff. “Testing is a tool we can use to limit the disruption of the pandemic for all of us – particularly our students. This is one easy thing we can all do to give our students the best chance at ending the school year on a positive note.”

As the state emphasizes testing in sports and the protective benefits this offers, participants in outdoor sports will have the option to remove their face covering while on the field or court. Face coverings must continue to be worn while not actively playing, for example on the sidelines or in the dugout. Face coverings must also continue to be worn at all times for indoor sports.