

Key planning recommendations for mass gatherings in the context of COVID-19

Interim guidance

29 May 2020



This document is an update of the interim guidance document entitled “Key planning recommendations for mass gatherings in the context of COVID-19”, published by WHO on 19 March 2020. This version has been revised to reflect the evolution of the knowledge on the pandemic over the past weeks, and to ensure alignment with the most recent guidance on COVID-19 issued by WHO.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to host governments, health authorities and national or international organizers of mass gatherings on containing risks of COVID-19 transmission associated with mass gathering events.

General considerations and advice applicable to the organization of mass gatherings, and addressing risks of any origin, should also be taken into account when planning an event, as highlighted in WHO’s publication *Public health for mass gatherings: key considerations*¹

Background

Mass gatherings are events characterized by the concentration of people at a specific location for a specific purpose over a set period of time that have the potential to strain the planning and response resources of the host country or community.¹ Mass gatherings can include a single event or a combination of several events at different venues, such as the Olympics. There are a diverse range of mass gatherings such as sports, music/entertainment, religious events, large conferences and exhibitions, and others.

In the context of COVID-19, mass gatherings are events that could amplify the transmission of the virus and potentially disrupt the host country’s response capacity. COVID-19 is transmitted from person to person through respiratory droplets and contact with contaminated surfaces, and the risk of transmission appears to be proportional to the closeness (less than 1 metre) and frequency of the interaction between an infected individual and an individual who is not infected.² Mass gatherings can be planned or spontaneous, but in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, relevant authorities should ensure that spontaneous events are kept to a minimum since these events likely did not have adequate planning to implement prevention and control measures to reduce the risk of transmission or the potential strain on health services.

Mass gatherings are not merely recreational events; they have important implications on the psychological well-being of large number of individuals (e.g. religious events), can play an important role in promoting healthy behaviours (e.g.

sports), provide employment for a great number of people, and could leave a legacy of improved assets or capacities developed as a result of hosting a mass gathering event.¹ Since mass gatherings have substantial political, cultural, social, and economic implications, authorities should assess the importance and necessity of an event and consider the option that it may take place, provided all associated public health risks are adequately addressed and mitigated.

Risk assessment exercise for mass gatherings in the context of COVID-19

Any decision to restrict, modify, postpone, cancel, or proceed with holding a mass gathering should be based on a rigorous risk assessment exercise, tailored to the event.³⁻⁵

The risk assessment should be undertaken by local and national public health authorities and event organizers with input from other relevant authorities (emergencies, transport, safety and security etc.), based on the following considerations:

- I. **Normative and epidemiological context in which the event takes place** - the host country’s existing regulations on public health and social measures (PHSM)⁶ to control spread of COVID-19, which reflects the intensity of transmission in the area;
- II. **Evaluation of risk factors associated with the event** – appraisal of the likelihood that the event may contribute to the spread of COVID-19 and that the health services capacity may be exceeded by such spread;
- III. **Capacity to apply prevention and control measures** - the ability to implement actions that can reduce the risks associated with the event.

The overall risk associated with a mass gathering event is the outcome of a process that incorporates (i) the risk of amplified COVID-19 transmission associated with the event and its expected burden on the health system and (ii) the capacity of health authorities and event organizers to prevent and control such risks.

1. Normative and epidemiological context

WHO currently describes [four transmission scenarios](#) of increasing intensity for COVID-19 (no reported cases, sporadic cases, clusters of cases and community transmission).⁷ A country or area can move from one transmission scenario to another, in either direction. In response to each transmission scenario, countries have

adopted progressively stricter public health and social measures, applicable at the individual level (e.g. hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, physical distancing) and potentially at the community level (e.g. movement restrictions, limitation to social and professional activities).

In countries that are implementing strict movement and physical distancing measures aimed at decreasing transmission of COVID-19,⁶ it is unlikely that authorities will allow mass gatherings to take place. However, in countries where restrictive measures are being progressively adjusted in response to an evolving epidemiology, the decision to proceed with an event and how to proceed, becomes highly relevant.

WHO has issued guidance on the progressive adjustment of public health and social measures in response to the epidemiological evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸ The risk assessment for a mass gathering should reflect the host country's adjustments to their public health and social measures. As countries loosen their public health and social measures based on local epidemiology, the "safety nets" provided by such measures to reduce and control the transmission of COVID-19 will no longer be available. This makes conducting thorough risk assessments for planned mass gathering events even more important.

2. Evaluation of the risk factors associated with the mass gathering event

This step of the risk assessment exercise examines the key characteristics of the mass gathering event, with the aim of profiling and quantifying the associated risk of COVID-19 transmission. It also examines the context in which the event takes place, notably from a health system perspective. Areas to consider in the evaluation include, but are not limited to:

- The characteristics of the event's designated venue(s) (location, size/type, indoor/outdoor, crowd density, etc.)
- The number and key characteristics of the expected participants in the event (age, health status, provenance, international/local travel to event, etc.)
- The expected interactions among participants occurring during the event (closeness of contact, etc.)
- The expected duration of the event
- The capacity of the host country's health system to detect and manage cases of COVID-19 in terms of policies, resources, and capacities

3. Capacity to apply prevention and control measures

Prevention and control measures are public health actions that aim to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission inherent in the event under consideration, as well as the likelihood that health services may be strained by the event. Prevention and control measures may:

- Modify the characteristics of the event (e.g. venue, attendees, facilities, equipment), or
- Focus on the capacity of health and other relevant authorities and organizers to strengthen preparedness and response to a public health issue that occurs before, during, or after the mass gathering event. Prevention and control measures can be applied throughout the

event's timeline - in the planning phase, the operational phase, and the post-event phase.

Planning phase

The planning phase is the period preceding the event, when plans are developed, tested, and revised. Prevention and control measures applicable during this phase include:

- Liaison with all relevant stakeholders
 - Establishing direct links and channels of communication between event organizers, health authorities, and other relevant authorities
 - Establishing collaboration and coordination mechanisms among all stakeholders, partners, and constituencies involved in the event
- Development of a preparedness and response plan
 - Ensuring alignment of the event plan with wider national emergency preparedness and response plans
 - Making provisions for detecting and monitoring event-related cases of COVID-19, reducing the spread of the virus, managing and treating ill persons, disseminating public health messages specific to COVID-19 in culturally appropriate ways and in languages used by participants
 - Establishing a clear line of command and control, and enabling efficient situation analysis and decision-making
 - Developing a risk communication strategy and a community engagement plan for the event aimed at keeping the public informed about the health situation, key developments, and any advice and recommended actions they should take (e.g. social media monitoring)
- Assessment of capacities and resources
 - Making provisions for human resources, procurement of personal protective equipment and other medical consumables, availability of isolation rooms, cleaning schedules, etc., in close coordination with national and local health authorities, and other relevant authorities

Operational phase

The operational phase is the period during which the delivery of the event services takes place. Prevention and control measures applicable during this phase include:

- Modifications of the event (related to the venue)
 - Hosting the event, at least partially, online/remotely/virtually
 - Hosting the event outdoors rather than indoors
 - Adjusting the official capacity of the venue
 - Ensuring availability of handwashing facilities with soap and water and/or hand rub dispensers
 - Ensuring regular and thorough cleaning and disinfection of the venue by designated staff
 - Regulating the flow and density of people entering, attending, and departing the event (e.g. by increasing the frequency of transport, staggering arrivals,

registering attendees, numbering entries, designating seating, marking the floor)

- Modifications of the event (related to the participants)
 - Advising people to observe physical distancing, respiratory/cough etiquette, and hand hygiene practices
 - Advising people with higher risk of transmitting COVID-19 that they should not attend the event (e.g. those with COVID-19 symptoms, contacts of COVID-19 cases during their period of quarantine, or those coming from countries/areas with community transmission of COVID-19)
 - Advising people with higher risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19 (e.g. aged ≥ 65 years or with pre-existing medical conditions), and individuals in contact with higher-risk patients (e.g. residents in same household, long term care facility employees etc.), that they should not attend the event, or making special arrangements for them
- Modifications of the event (duration)
 - Keeping the duration of the event to a minimum to limit contact among participants
- Risk communication
 - Ensuring coordination and consistency in crafting and delivering culturally appropriate and language-specific messages to participants and the public
 - Disseminating key messages in line with national health policies, including:
 - Visual reminders on basic preventive measures, especially physical distancing, respiratory/cough etiquette, and hand hygiene practices
 - Visual reminders on action and steps to be followed by people developing symptoms of COVID-19
 - Visual reminders on recommended/required use of face masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Surveillance of participants, aimed at detecting and managing individuals developing symptoms during the event
 - Detection and management of event-related COVID-19 cases should be conducted in accordance with national policies and regulations, within the framework of national health systems
 - Isolation facilities should be made available at the event site for participants who develop symptoms, for initial assessment and triage by designated medical staff, and for their transportation to a health facility if needed
 - Arrangements should be made with national and local health authorities regarding diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19 cases identified during the event

- Liaison between event organizers and health authorities, along the following lines:
 - In case participants or staff develop symptoms during the event, event organizers should liaise with national and local health authorities, as well with those of the participant's home city or country, and facilitate sharing of information
 - Individuals who develop symptoms upon returning to their home city or country should be advised to contact public health authorities about their potential exposure
 - Liaison between event organizers and health authorities is required to ensure that systems are in place to detect cases arising in the local population as a consequence of the event

4. Determination of the overall risk of the mass gathering

The overall risk associated with an event is the result of an assessment process that considers both the risk factors associated with an event and the capacity that health and other relevant authorities and event organizers possess to mitigate those risks through the adoption of a set of preventive and control measures.

WHO has developed tools that assign a numerical score to each risk factor and control measure,³⁻⁵ thus allowing for the calculation of a resulting overall risk score, which corresponds to a defined risk category and to a recommendation for the event. A review of the risk assessment at regular intervals is advised, since the relative importance of the risk factors associated with the event, and consequently the relevance of the prevention and control measures applied, are dynamic and may evolve over time.

Generally, events associated with a low or very low risk of COVID-19 transmission and low strain on the health system may be considered sufficiently safe to proceed. Events with a moderate, high, or very high level of risk might not be sufficiently safe to proceed and would require a more thorough application of prevention and control measures. If the risk of spreading COVID-19 remains significant after application of all control measures, postponing or cancelling the planned event should be considered.

WHO does not have the mandate to enforce any restriction, modification, postponement, or cancellation of a mass gathering event, or to authorize that its organization may proceed. Rather, it advises authorities and event organizers on best practice based on available evidence.

5. Legacy and lessons learnt

Legacy is the improved assets or capacity developed as a result of hosting a mass gathering, and can include improvements in the health systems of the host country, improvements in health behaviours, and ability to deliver future mass gatherings.¹ As always, reviewing lessons learnt and evaluating event legacy is of paramount importance to conduct a formal assessment of policies and improve best practices. Authorities and organizers should see such events as an opportunity to enhance their ways of working and pass this learning on to future event organizers and the host country.

Post-event phase

The post-event phase follows the conclusion of the mass gathering. Prevention and control measures applicable during this phase include:

References

1. World Health Organization. Public health for mass gatherings: key considerations (Interim Guidance) (<https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/717805/retrieve>, 1 January 2015)
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6. World Health Organization. Overview of public health and social measures in the context of COVID-19 (Interim Guidance) (<https://www.who.int/publications-detail/overview-of-public-health-and-social-measures-in-the-context-of-covid-19>, 18 May 2020)
7. World Health Organization. Critical preparedness, readiness, and response actions for COVID-19. (<https://www.who.int/publications-detail/critical-preparedness-readiness-and-response-actions-for-covid-19>, 22 March 2020)
8. World Health Organization. Considerations in adjusting public health and social measures in the context of COVID-19 (Interim Guidance) (<https://www.who.int/publications-detail/considerations-in-adjusting-public-health-and-social-measures-in-the-context-of-covid-19-interim-guidance>, 15 April 2020)

Acknowledgements

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WHO continues to monitor the situation closely for any changes that may affect this interim guidance. Should any factors change, WHO will issue a further update. Otherwise, this interim guidance document will expire 2 years after the date of publication.

Additional WHO COVID-19 Mass Gathering Technical Guidance and Tools

- Generic Risk Assessment and Mitigation Checklist ([available on WHO website](#))
- Q&A: Mass gatherings and COVID-19 ([available on WHO website](#))
- Sports addendum risk assessment and mitigation checklist ([available on WHO website](#))
- Religious addendum risk assessment and mitigation checklist ([available on WHO website](#))
- Practical considerations for religious leaders and faith-based communities ([available on WHO website](#))
- Safe Ramadan practices in the context of COVID-19 ([available on WHO website](#))
- Considerations for mass gatherings in the context of COVID-19 ([available on WHO website](#))