



Responding to Speculation of Enhanced Risk of Hockey Relative to COVID-19

For Ice Facility, Affiliate and Local Association Leaders

Dec. 2020

There has been *speculation* through recent stories in the news media to suggest hockey is riskier than other youth sports/activities related to COVID-19 and specifically the rink environment. Speculation is the key word as there is no scientific evidence to back up that speculation.

We reject the premise that hockey is riskier than other sports or activities relative to the pandemic. As with any sport or activity, we have always acknowledged there is some risk associated with playing hockey.

To help leaders in hockey, we've developed this document to add context and commentary around some of the things that have been in recent news reports. We will update this document as needed.

The information/commentary included within has been developed with guidance from our medical experts, led by **Dr. Michael Stuart**, chief medical and safety officer of USA Hockey from the Mayo Clinic, who has access to the wide network of subject matter experts at the Mayo Clinic and beyond; and **Dr. Deverick Anderson**, a noted national infectious disease expert and epidemiologist from Infection Control Education for Major Sports, who has consulted with major professional sports leagues and other sports entities, including the NHL and NFL.



There has been speculation put forth through news media articles that the COVID-19 virus lingers 6-to-9 feet above the ice. In one recent story, the cited source speculated “that ice rinks may trap the virus around head level in a rink that, by design, restricts airflow, temperature and humidity.”

USA Hockey Commentary

Relative to the virus lingering above the ice surface, Dr. Anderson says, “News reports have failed to disentangle risk of transmission related to off-ice social interactions and on-ice play. If droplets routinely hovered 6-to-9 feet above the ice, hockey would almost certainly have a history of disproportionate droplet-based infections every season from other viruses (i.e. influenza).”

Further, and contrary to the notion that air flow is restricted, ice rinks have ventilation systems in place to circulate the air regularly. Industry standards for indoor sports and entertainment facilities, including ice rinks, specify minimum ventilation rates and other measures for new and existing buildings that are intended to provide indoor air quality that is acceptable to human occupants and that minimize adverse health effects.

Below are other excerpts from recent media stories with USA Hockey context added.

Excerpt: In Maine, an asymptomatic referee exposed up to 400 people in two days.

USA Hockey Commentary

*There have been **no** reported cases by teams or officials involved in these games in the weeks after this occurred. That is an important piece of this story which was not reported.*

Excerpt: In Massachusetts, state officials estimated that 108 initial hockey cases amounted to 3,000 to 4,000 others potentially exposed.

USA Hockey Commentary

“Hockey cases” means people who play hockey contracted COVID-19. There is no scientific data to conclude how those 108 contracted COVID-19 and further there is no scientific evidence or data to confirm that others contracted COVID-19 from any of those 108.

Excerpt: In an October report, the CDC detailed a large outbreak in Florida among amateur adult hockey players on two teams that played each other but had no other contact. Investigators speculated that the indoor space and close contact increased the risk of infection.

USA Hockey Commentary

This adult game was played in June 2020. It is not known if the infections happened at the rink. Were players asymptomatic from both teams ahead of getting together? Did one player infect all involved? Did these players follow risk mitigation guidelines? While we appreciate the efforts of the CDC, this report is essentially speculative and does not share any conclusive scientific evidence.

Excerpt: In Vermont, an outbreak at a single ice rink ripped through the center of the state, affecting at least 20 towns in at least four counties, and seeding other outbreaks at several schools. By Oct. 30, when Vermont Gov. Phil Scott (R) detailed the outbreak at a press briefing, 473 contacts had been associated with it.

USA Hockey Commentary

This excerpt depicts hockey as responsible for an outbreak when the story details social gatherings without masks and failure to quarantine as the likely contributors to the outbreak, not hockey.

Excerpt: One critical way hockey differs from other contact team sports is how players do line changes — substitutions of groups of players — and are expected to sprint for nearly the whole time they are on the ice. Experts say it probably leads to heavier breathing, resulting in more particles being exhaled and inhaled.

USA Hockey Commentary

While hockey players can substitute during a game vs. just at stoppages, to portray hockey as having heavier breathing than other sports (basketball, soccer, etc.) is without merit.

RISK MITIGATION AND ITS IMPORTANCE

From the outset of the pandemic, USA Hockey has put forward significant risk mitigation guidelines to help the hockey community ensure the safest possible environment for all involved with the sport. Those guidelines continue to be updated as new information becomes available.

[Returning To The Rinks](#)

[Mitigating Risk Recommendations](#)

Says Dr. Anderson: "I've reviewed the guidelines from USA Hockey, and the hockey community can feel good about the direction they're receiving. As USA Hockey has rightfully acknowledged, there is risk with hockey relative to COVID-19, but there is no evidence that the risk is disproportionate to the risk from other sports or activities. I'd also note that we've seen next to no evidence of virus transmission on the field of play in any sport."

Says Dr. Stuart: "We encourage everyone to follow the risk mitigation guidelines at all times. The vaccination process has begun, but we must continue to comply with the prevention strategies for some time to come. We're all in this together and it's important that everyone to do their part."

IN SUMMARY

Dr. Anderson says, "There's no definitive evidence that hockey and ice rinks themselves are higher risk, and overall there's no definitive evidence to suggest hockey is riskier than any other sport or activity."

To Remember

Hockey benefits from the significance of the playing surface, typically either 17,000 square feet (85x200) or 20,000 square feet (100x200), in addition to significant ventilation systems to circulate air. In addition, hockey players are covered from head to toe with protective equipment.

Thousands of hockey games and practices have been conducted safely this season throughout the country.

Hockey provides important physical, mental and social benefits to all involved and those benefits today are perhaps more important than at any other time in recent history.

Playing the sport is a personal choice.

USA HOCKEY RESOURCES

Click [here](#) for USA Hockey COVID-19 resources.