

Laboratory and animal research at Rush during COVID-19

Revised February 8, 2022

As of February 9, 2022, the Task Force recommends that laboratory research continue operations while maintaining COVID-19 precautions (masking, social distancing, and frequent handwashing) for the health and safety of students, faculty, staff, and the public. It remains vital that leadership require adherence to precautions by all team members to ensure a safe environment.

For additional details on this guidance, see the remainder of the document below.

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General principles

1. As education and research are cornerstones of Rush University's vital mission it is important that laboratory research, including animal research, restart at Rush in a timely manner. This re-entry proposal is rooted in safety for the health and well-being of faculty, staff, trainees, and the public.
2. Research at Rush will be aligned and consistent with health and safety guidelines that have been recommended by the IDPH, Rush ID, and Rush Leadership.
3. Laboratory research has been allowed to continue at Rush with precautions related to COVID-19 including mandatory masking, frequent handwashing, and social distancing. With the goal of limiting exposure to students, staff, and faculty, researchers that can work remotely should do so, and staggered schedules should be employed to maintain minimal density in individual laboratories.

Phased approach to laboratory activities during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

Phases of laboratory activity

Phase 1: Ramping down of lab activities; restriction of building access to essential personnel.

Phase 2: Performance of time-sensitive research whose pause would seriously damage future viability of the research program; research that is clearly relevant to COVID-19.

Phase 3: Gradual, monitored restarting of some research and careful expansion.

Phase 4: Beginning of a return to normal operations with permanently enhanced safety guidelines.

Laboratory research update (February 8, 2022)

Since June 2021 research has ramped up at Rush and followed the following path:

- Gradual re-entry of essential researchers.
- All personnel should follow the universal masking protocol.
- Physical/social distancing should be followed at all times.
- Personnel with a temperature of 100.4 F or higher and/or other symptoms (cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, headache, chest tightness, extreme fatigue, loss of taste or smell, diarrhea, muscle aches) should not come to work.
- PIs cannot coerce their research staff or students that do not feel comfortable with present COVID environment to come to work.
- Department Chairs, or their designees will authorize the re-opening of specific labs and monitor their adherence to scheduling and safety policies.

Given the dramatic increase in COVID-19 cases in Chicagoland, we are currently between phases 3 and 4. The laboratory task force proposed requirements that apply to wet-labs with the recognition that Rush reserves the right to return to phases 3, 2 or even 1 if the situation dictates or to relocate or remove employees as needed. Our guiding principle is, and will continue to be, to mitigate health and safety risks to faculty, staff and trainees based on the advice of health care professionals and other experts.

To reduce the risks of faculty, staff and trainees potentially being exposed to SARS-CoV-2 in the workplace or exposing others, we should aim to keep the density of our workforce as low as possible at any given time and to create a balanced daily plan that maintains safe distances between employees. The most important three elements that will help keep our faculty, staff, and trainees safe are: (i) wearing a Rush-issued face mask (ii) regular hand washing; and (iii) physical/social distancing. Compliance with the instructions outlined below, as well as from individual PIs, Department Chairs, and Rush administration should be required for continued access – to help ensure compliance violation could result in the revocation of building access privileges and/or other appropriate disciplinary action.

No two laboratories are alike. The directives listed here describe approaches devised in consultation with infectious disease experts and are in alignment with institutions across the country. There may be laboratory-specific safety issues that should be brought to the attention of individual PIs and/or Department Chairs. For example, some laboratory work may involve the frequent use of shared equipment, such as a microscope, and extra cleaning precautions should be taken to minimize the risk for coworkers using this shared resource. To reduce our collective risk as much as possible, a partnership must exist between each person working in a laboratory and the PI, Department Chair, building manager, and the University.

Staffing Options

There are several options departments can consider to maintain required physical/social distancing measures and reduce population density within buildings and work spaces.

Remote Work: Those who can work remotely to fulfill some or all of their work responsibilities may continue to do so to reduce the number of individuals on campus and the potential spread of SARS-CoV-

2. These arrangements, which should be approved by the immediate supervisor, can be done on a full or partial day/week schedule as appropriate.

Alternating Days: To limit the number of individuals and interactions among those on campus, departments could schedule partial staffing on alternating days. Such schedules will help enable physical/social distancing, especially in areas with large common workspaces.

Staggered Reporting/Departing: The beginning and end of the workday typically bring many people together at common entry/exit points of buildings. Staggering reporting and departure times will reduce traffic in common areas to meet physical/social distancing requirements. We propose a shift plan (figures attached) in which each laboratory defines when particular laboratory space will be used and the times of day during which individuals will work in the lab space (see attached spreadsheet). This shift plan could be facilitated using a restricted badged entry plan.

Safety Practices

Face masks: Face masks must be worn by all staff working on campus when in the presence of others and in public settings where other physical/social distancing measures are difficult to maintain (e.g., common work spaces, meeting rooms, classrooms, etc.). Appropriate use of face masks is critical in minimizing risks to others near you. You could spread SARS-CoV-2 to others even if you do not feel sick. The mask is not a substitute for physical/social distancing.

Restrooms: Use of restrooms should be limited, based on size, to ensure at least 6 feet distance between individuals. Signage should be installed to emphasize hand washing to reduce the potential transmission of the virus. Restroom cleaning should be emphasized to EVS/DFS.

Kitchens: Kitchen refrigerators should not be used at this time because of the inability to monitor and keep them disinfected. Signage should be installed.

Comparative Research Center (CRC) Animal Facility:

- Proper PPE in the CRC includes a Rush issued face mask, gloves and covering or replacing of street clothes with a lab coat, yellow isolation gown or scrub uniform.
- Social distancing should be practiced when possible and practical however, there is no specific limit on the number of personnel occupying a procedure room or operating room.
- Teaching and training surgical laboratories have resumed and restrictions on the number of individuals attending these events have been lifted.

Meetings: Convening in groups increases the risk of viral transmission. Where feasible, meetings should be held in whole or part using the extensive range of available collaboration tools (e.g. Zoom, WebEx, Microsoft Teams, Jabber, telephone, etc.). In person meetings should be limited to the restrictions of local, state and federal orders, assuming individuals can still maintain 3-6 feet of separation for physical/social distancing requirements. Departments should remove or rearrange chairs and tables or add visual cue marks in meeting rooms to support physical/social distancing practices between attendees. Collegial communication by email, instant message, telephone or other available technology should be encouraged, rather than face-to-face meetings.

Other considerations:

- Communication should be provided to all researchers, staff, and trainees about the fact that research on SARS-CoV-2 is being conducted in the four research buildings (e.g. using patient derived tissues).
- Rush faculty, staff, and trainees who travel to local Universities to use core facilities must follow the guidelines in the core facility and the institution in which the core resides.
- Non-Rush users to Rush core facilities should be paused at this time. Cores will be reopened to non-Rush users as soon as is practical and safe and will likely coincide with a change in the visitor policy and should be coordinated with the Rush core director for scheduling and an agreement to comply with Rush policies. The core directors will provide documentation to allow limited visitor access only to the building that houses the core facility.

Criteria for faculty, staff, and trainee research

Clinical and laboratory research are cornerstones of Rush University's vital mission. The guidelines for re-entry into the research environment during circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic are rooted in safety for the health and well-being of faculty, staff, trainees, and the public

Faculty, staff, or trainees who have needs (health or otherwise) that would preclude them from participating in research at this time should seek accommodations according to the university and medical center policies. Personnel who have tested positive for COVID-19 should follow the Rush System for Health or University guidelines for personnel who test positive for COVID-19 ([COVID positive guidelines](#)).