

Festivals and Other Multi-Day Large Gatherings: COVID-19 Planning Toolkit for Health Departments

August 2021

Overview

This toolkit aims to help health departments prevent the spread of COVID-19 at multi-day events that are expected to draw large numbers of people. It includes checklists, resources, and a case study that state and local health departments, event planners, vendors, and other partners can use to anticipate and plan for some of the challenges they could encounter.

For the purposes of this document, the term “festival” refers to any planned large gathering of people that lasts more than one day. Examples include music festivals, food festivals, harvest festivals, and state and county fairs. Of particular concern now are the more than 120 events with at least 20,000 attendees planned for this summer and fall in U.S. areas with substantial and high [levels](#) of COVID-19 transmission.

Initial Checklist

Some important items to consider when determining whether a festival should take place and the appropriate measures needed to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 spread include:

- Level of disease spread and vaccination coverage in the area where the event will be held.
- Level of disease spread in areas where attendees are coming from and approximate vaccination coverage among attendees based on available public health info.
- How much indoor space is available for attendees to maintain physical distance and how much outdoor space is available.
- Feasibility of using mitigation measures, such as requiring attendees to physically distance and wear masks, providing good ventilation, setting up handwashing stations, and cleaning frequently touched surfaces.
- Available resources and capacity for testing staff and attendees for infection at the venue, providing health care to people with COVID-19 symptoms, having isolation plans for them, and conducting case investigations and contact tracing in the jurisdiction.

Resources

CDC Large Events and Gatherings Info:

- [Community Organizations and Gatherings](#)
- [Event Planning and COVID-19: Questions and Answers](#)

Implementing COVID-19 Related Prevention Activities at Festivals

Pre-Festival Planning and Coordination

To help ensure a successful event with little or no transmission of COVID-19, **all partners** should be part of the planning and coordination of the event. This includes state and local health departments, event

organizers, vendors, and additional local partners (e.g., local homeland security/emergency management agencies, local law enforcement, city government, and local hospitals). In addition, health departments can use the case study and actions below to anticipate and plan for some of the challenges they could encounter.

Case Study

- A four-day music festival was held in June 2021 with more than 20,000 attendees, 600 staff and 15 performing acts/bands. Around 5,000 attendees stayed overnight in neighboring campsites. Additional attendees included local residents and out-of-town participants who stayed at nearby homes or other rental accommodations. At the time of the event, there were no state mask mandates or physical distancing requirements.
- Before the event, county officials approved the event permit after a review process involving the county public health department. Public health and event planners agreed on mitigation, messaging, and testing/vaccination options for staff and attendees.
- All staff, musicians, and artists were required to show "proof of vaccination or proof of negative COVID-19 test result taken within 48 hours" for entry.
- Festival coordinators had plans in place to isolate any attendees with COVID-19 symptoms to prevent potential exposure and to recommend that they be tested for COVID-19.
- State health department staff used a mobile vaccination unit to coordinate vaccine distribution during the festival.
- The state health department provided materials for antigen/PCR testing at the venue and county health staff coordinated testing for the event's medical team. Testing was free and no incentives were provided. County health staff requested that all people entering medical tents be screened for SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, regardless of symptoms. Attendees who tested positive were required to isolate from other attendees and staff.
- Organizers displayed signs encouraging attendees to physically distance themselves from others by 3 feet (a shorter distance than the CDC-recommended 6 feet), wear masks, and stay home when sick. COVID-19 prevention messages were displayed on venue screens between music sets. The festival website included a statement for transparency provided by the county on the high rates of the COVID-19 Delta variant circulating in the area.
- Overall, adherence to mitigation strategies and uptake of testing and vaccination at the festival were low:
 - Organizers did not verify proof of COVID-19 vaccination or a negative test result.
 - They also did not clearly define the isolation policy for people who tested positive on-site. No attendees with positive test results were identified. Had any been identified, they would have been asked to leave; however, their access to the festival grounds was not restricted and the festival had no designated location where they could isolate.
 - There were no visible signs indicating testing availability or directing attendees where to get tested.
 - Signs announcing that vaccination was available on-site were visible and prominently displayed, but unfortunately, did not draw large numbers of takers.

Pre-Festival Planning Checklist

- Schedule planning meetings as early as possible before the event that include all partners (e.g., festival organizers, venue operators, spokespersons and community leaders, safety, security, and medical teams) with a role in implementing COVID-19 mitigation measures.
 - Consider the CDC [Community Mitigation Framework](#) for mitigation implementation.
 - Provide situational awareness on local COVID-19 transmission to partners.
 - Go through the checklists in this guidance for mitigation measures required and document how they will be implemented.
 - Consider CDC recommendations that unvaccinated individuals should continue wearing a mask until they are fully vaccinated. CDC also recommends that fully vaccinated individuals wear a mask indoors in public if in [an area of substantial or high transmission](#). Note that CDC's recommendations are subject to change.
 - Create a plan to educate staff and attendees to ensure they know that they should NOT come to the event if they become sick with COVID-19 symptoms, test positive for COVID-19, or have been exposed to someone with symptoms or someone with suspected or confirmed COVID-19.
 - Require proof that all staff, musicians, and artists are fully vaccinated or negative for COVID-19 by test result taken within 48 hours of entry to the festival.
- Conduct frequent communication prior to and during the festival between health department and festival organizers to ensure contractual adherence to COVID-19 mitigation measures.
- Designate a local health department point of contact and event staff Safety lead who will work together to address all COVID-19 related situations and concerns.
- Ensure that all agreements and logistical plans are agreed upon in writing, and conduct walk-throughs in advance of and during the event.
- Create a plan for behavioral health messaging before, during, and after the event.
- Engage influencers and entertainers early on to encourage safe attendance through social media and other channels. Make sure that all partners are sharing consistent messages.
- If testing and/or vaccinations are required in advance of an event, identify a means to validate the results.
- Check in with event planners to discuss how local health staff can ensure proper mitigation for the event during the set-up phase.
- Plan for evaluation and include milestones to evaluate progress.
- Monitor local transmission indicators ([CDC COVID Data Tracker](#) is an option for county level information) and create contingency plans for the event if transmission remains stable or substantially increases.
- Consider using mobile cell phone data to help determine the number of attendees, the number of campers (if relevant), where they visited most in nearby cities, and what jurisdiction they arrived from for information gathering in attendee information as a baseline and for potential contact tracing context.
- Plan for contact tracing support following the festival for any people with positive test results identified within the state or for those returning to locations out of state.

Resources

- [Interim Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People | CDC](#)

- [CDC COVID Data Tracker](#)

Events and Gatherings: Preparing for if Someone Gets Sick

Consider the following checklists when making initial preparations before the event for if someone gets sick with COVID-19.

Before Someone Gets Sick Checklist

- Make sure that staff and attendees know that if they get sick at the event, they should notify event planners (e.g., the designated COVID-19 point of contact) right away.
- Develop systems to: Allow staff and attendees to self-report to administrators if they have symptoms of COVID-19, a positive test for COVID-19, or were exposed to someone with COVID-19 within the last 14 days.
- Notify individuals of closures and restrictions put in place to limit COVID-19 exposure.
- Develop staff policies for returning to the venue after COVID-19 illness. CDC's criteria to [discontinue home isolation](#) and quarantine can inform these policies.
- Identify and create an isolation room or area to separate anyone who has COVID-19 symptoms or who has tested positive but does not have symptoms.
- Develop procedures for safely transporting anyone who is sick to their home or to a healthcare facility.
- Develop a plan to support staff and attendees experiencing trauma or challenges related to COVID-19.

When Someone Gets Sick

- Immediately separate individual(s) with COVID-19 symptoms from others.
- Safely transport sick individuals home or to a healthcare facility, depending on how severe their symptoms are.
- If calling an ambulance or bringing someone to the hospital, try to call first to alert them that the person may have COVID-19.
- Close off areas used by a sick person and do not use these areas until after cleaning and disinfecting them (for outdoor areas, this includes surfaces or shared objects in the area, if applicable).
- Advise sick individuals that they should not return to the venue until they have met CDC's criteria to discontinue home isolation.

After Someone Gets Sick

- In accordance with state and local laws and regulations, notify local health officials, staff, and families of a person with COVID-19 while maintaining the individual's confidentiality in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- Notify individuals of closures and restrictions put in place due to COVID-19 exposure.
- Advise those who have had close contact with a person diagnosed with COVID-19 to stay home, self-monitor for symptoms, and follow CDC guidance if symptoms develop.
- Close off areas used by the person who is sick and do not use those areas until after cleaning and disinfecting. Wait as long as possible (at least several hours) before you clean and disinfect.
 - If less than 24 hours have passed** since the person who is sick or diagnosed with COVID-19 has not been in the space, cleaning and disinfect the space.

- ❑ **If more than 24 hours have passed** since the person who is sick or diagnosed with COVID-19 has been in the space, cleaning is enough. You may choose to also disinfect depending on [certain conditions](#) or everyday practices required by your facility.
- ❑ **If more than 3 days have passed** since the person who is sick or diagnosed with COVID-19 has been in the space, no additional cleaning (beyond regular cleaning practices) is needed.
- ❑ Make sure of safe and correct use and storage of cleaning and disinfection products, including storing them securely away from children.

Resources

- CDC's [Events and Gatherings: A Readiness and Planning Tool](#)
- [Race to End COVID Playbook](#)
- [Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility | CDC](#)

Logistics for Testing and Vaccination

Providing testing and vaccination at venues where large numbers of people are congregating can offer a convenient opportunity for people to access these services in a friendly setting. Offering vaccination at venues where large numbers of people are attending can increase equitable vaccine access. When setting up these activities at a festival, consider the following:

Testing and Vaccination Logistics Set Up Checklist

- ❑ **Location:** Ideally, set up testing and vaccination activities in a safe and secure yet convenient area to ensure visibility.
- ❑ **Promotion:** Encourage attendees before, during, and after an event to get tested and vaccinated.
 - ❑ *Before:* Promote testing and vaccination during the ticketing process, on the event website, on social media, and in any follow up materials that are sent to attendees. Consider the use of incentives (e.g., backstage pass or front row seating) or promotions.
 - ❑ *During:* Use signs directing attendees to the testing and vaccination locations, announcements between sets or activities, and PSAs on screens. Maximize celebrity engagement to promote services. Employ friendly staff who are experienced with direct patient care and discussing the benefits of COVID-19 testing and vaccines.
 - ❑ *After:* Emphasize the importance of testing and vaccination in follow-up emails sent to attendees or with any post-event surveys that are sent out. Maintain registration lists in case a larger follow-up effort is needed.
- ❑ **Timing:** Consider timing of testing and vaccination.
 - ❑ *Testing:* Encourage testing before the event to make sure people don't come if they're positive. Alternatively, consider administering rapid antigen tests at the beginning of the event as a screening tool for attendees. In this case, be transparent with attendees about consequences for them if they have positive results via rapid test on-site.
 - ❑ *Vaccination:* Organizers should encourage attendees to get fully vaccinated before attending the event. In general, people are considered fully vaccinated 2 weeks after their second dose in a 2-dose series, such as the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, or 2 weeks after a single-dose vaccine, such as Johnson & Johnson's Janssen vaccine. For on-site vaccinations, consider offering them to people as they are leaving, as most people

would likely prefer that any potential side effects not occur during the event. Have clear plans for registration areas and the required 15-minute waiting period after vaccination.

Testing

Testing Options Checklist

- State and local health departments can use their field testing resources and vendors to set up a testing tent or table at an event.
- Federal resources are also available for pop-up testing. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Increasing Community Access to Testing (ICATT) program provides no-cost testing to at-risk, underserved, disproportionately affected populations, and schools. ICATT leverages state and private sector partners, such as the Talladega Super Speedway, to provide no-cost testing to bring testing to people where they are. For additional questions on testing, email ICATT at ICATT@HHS.GOV. Contact your CDC Health Department Liaison Officer at eocevent375@cdc.gov for more details.
- Tests with rapid result turnaround (e.g., antigen) could be more efficient than laboratory PCR testing to provide actionable results within minutes. Understand that more false negatives occur with rapid tests.
- Consider requiring all staff to provide a negative test if they are not vaccinated and consider requiring additional screening such as daily temperature and symptom checks.

Resources

CDC Testing Guidance:

- o [Interim Guidance for SARS-CoV-2 Testing in Non-Healthcare Workplaces](#)
- o [Antigen Testing for Screening in Non-Healthcare Workplaces](#)

Vaccination

Vaccination Option Checklist

- Consider offering either the single dose vaccine, such as J&J/Janssen COVID-19 vaccine, or the two dose vaccines, such as the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines. If the COVID-19 vaccine to be offered at the festival requires two doses, make plans for how to share information about how to get the second dose within the appropriate time window.
- State and local health departments can use their state resources, such as the National Guard, or their mobile vaccine units to provide on-site vaccinations to event attendees. Consider scheduling appointments and be prepared for walkups.
- Federal resources may be available to support vaccine administration. Contact your CDC Health Department Liaison Office at eocevent375@cdc.gov for more details.

Resources

CDC Vaccination Guidance:

- o [Interim Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People](#)
- o [COVID-19 Vaccine Community Toolkit](#)
- o [Key Operational Considerations for Jurisdictions Planning to Operate COVID-19 Vaccination Clinics](#)
- o [Guidance for Planning Vaccination Clinics | CDC](#)

Logistics for Mitigation

To help reduce on-site transmission of SARS-CoV-2, consider the actions below.

Logistics Checklist

- Require proof of a negative SARS-CoV-2 test within three days prior to the event or proof of vaccination.
- Install physical barriers, create pods, or block off seats to separate attendees into smaller groups.
- Modify audience layouts to create static groups or cohorts of individuals and avoid mixing between groups.
- Regularly clean high-touch surfaces and objects.
- Provide free masks and hand sanitizer for attendees. Encourage mask use as appropriate. CDC recommends that unvaccinated individuals should continue wearing a mask until they are fully vaccinated. CDC also recommends that fully vaccinated individuals wear a [mask indoors in public if in an area of substantial or high transmission](#). Note that CDC's recommendations are subject to change.
- Provide cashless payment options.
- Set up handwashing/sanitation stations throughout the venue.

Resources

- [Interim Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People | CDC](#)
- [CDC COVID Data Tracker](#)
- [Guidance for Implementing COVID-19 Prevention Strategies in the Context of Varying Community Transmission Levels and Vaccination Coverage | MMWR \(cdc.gov\)](#)

Behavioral Health Messaging

To help ensure a safe event, communicate written and verbal messaging before, during, and after the festival. The following checklists identify ways local health departments and event organizers can broadly share consistent messages with attendees.

Messaging Before the Event Checklist

- Email and text attendees information on COVID-19 vaccines and when to get vaccinated before an event to ensure full vaccine efficacy upon arrival. Use social media and email attendees to share any requirements or mitigation measures that would be in place during the event and suggest items to bring such as facial masks and hand sanitizer.
- Place reminders such as “Wear a mask” on tickets and bracelets.
- Promote COVID-19 vaccination and testing on entertainers’ and influencers’ social media and events page.

Messaging During the Event Checklist

- Provide them with messages and have event entertainers, influencers, and vendors speak about COVID-19 mitigation and vaccination. Invite state and local health representatives to speak about COVID-19 in a culturally appropriate way.

- Consider asking “mask champions” to encourage people to wear masks to the festival.
- Place signs around the venue reminding attendees to practice proper precautions. Use arrows and place markers to indicate where people should stand and move throughout the event.
- Promote adherence to mitigation through social media; create a hashtag where attendees can post photos and videos of themselves wearing masks that can be shared by event organizers, celebrities, and state and local health departments.
- Promote vaccination at the event by offering credit toward food, drinks, and merchandise. Give away T-shirts or other prizes to vaccinated attendees or have raffles where vaccinated attendees can win VIP access or meet-and-greet sessions with celebrities attending or performing at events.
- Have mask monitors select random mask wearers from the crowd and show them on “fan cams” as they receive vouchers or giveaways tossed to them.

Messaging After the Event Checklist

- If needed based on the vaccine offered, place signs at exits to remind attendees who got vaccinated during the event to get their second shot at the appropriate time.
- Encourage attendees who develop COVID-19 symptoms after the event to get tested.
- Send a text message, IM, and email to attendees alerting them to a positive test among attendees if it is linked back to the event. This might encourage them to get tested and vaccinated.

Event Evaluation

Consider implementing a brief post-event evaluation to help mitigate secondary cases of COVID-19 and ensure better mitigation, logistics, and messaging at future festivals in an area.

Post-Event Checklist

- Set up a debrief meeting with festival organizers and local public health staff involved in the event planning and execution to discuss successes and challenges related to the COVID-19 mitigation strategies implemented.
- Discuss ways to improve COVID-19 mitigation strategies at future events by asking questions such as these:
 - What corrective actions can be developed to improve large gathering plans, policies, and procedures based on past festivals/events?
 - What are the top three strengths and the top three weaknesses requiring improvement?
 - What worked well during the event?
 - What areas of improvement were revealed? Which areas are priorities?
- Incorporate specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) corrective actions to address capability gaps and shortcomings for future festivals/events.