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Research Involving Human Participants and COVID – Bulletin #5

The past 18 months has presented unprecedented challenges for research communities across British Columbia. The UNBC Office of Research and Research Ethics Board thank the UNBC research community for their patience and support over this period of great change. These bulletins serve to highlight new and emerging considerations for research involving human participants.

Researchers are asked to review the latest Provincial Health Officer (PHO) guidance before finalizing and submitting any new ethics applications, amendments, or annual renewals. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that any in-person research, including classroom-based projects, meet PHO orders.

REB Approvals and Amendments

Researchers should continue to consider ways that can reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission within research teams and with research participants. As stated in our previous update, any changes to approved planned research activities that increase the level of risk to participants, regardless of prior REB approval or PHO orders, need to be submitted to the REB through the regular amendment process. If a protocol with previous paused in-person activities is now being resumed, please submit an amendment that outlines PHO indexed engagement. An example would be to have the Information Letter state that in-person focus group interviews would only be held if permissible by PHO. This gives both the REB and the participant assurance of the intent to act within PHOs, and the opportunity to engage once permitted.

The Safe Research Guidelines and the PHO-indexed grid ([Restart research information](#)) have been updated to include guidelines for classroom research. In all instances, researchers will need to describe their safe research protocols for both new and resuming research and attach their Safe Research Plan to their ethics application. Existing safety protocols that do not address the safety of research participants (in addition to staff safety considerations) will not be sufficient. The UNBC Research Ethics Board will not approve activities that do not adhere to the minimum standards imposed by the PHO for the community where research is taking place.

Mask and Vaccination Mandates

Effective August 25, 2021, a new PHO order came into effect requiring that those aged 12 and older wear a mask in indoor public settings, regardless of vaccination status (<https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2021HLTH0053-001659>). Masks are also encouraged for those aged 2-12 years and extended health and safety measure were added on October 01, 2021 to include K-12 students. ([Expanded health, safety measures for K-12 students | BC Gov News](#)). The affected indoor settings include:

- Schools - K-12 staff, visitors and students
- Common areas of non-profit organizations

- All indoor areas of post-secondary institutions including lobbies, hallways, stairwells, elevators, classrooms, and labs
- All retail settings, including malls, coffee shops, grocery stores, and drug stores
- Public buildings such as airports, city halls, libraries, and community/recreation centres
- Restaurants, pubs, and bars (unless seated)
- Public transportation and shared vehicles
- Office buildings where services to the public are provided
- Common areas of sport and fitness centres when not engaged in physical activity

Masks are not required for outdoor research activities, so long as physical distancing can be maintained. You do **NOT** have to update or amend your research activities related to mask use, unless there are special circumstances that may impact COVID-19 risks.

Effective September 13, proof of one dose of vaccine and effective October 23, proof of full vaccination will be necessary for access some public spaces (<https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2021HLTH0053-001659>). This may have implications for researchers that are undertaking human research within these settings. Researchers must account for this in the planning and implementation of their research projects.

As a reminder, it is likely that PHO Orders will continue to evolve and may change with little notice. Researchers who propose to use in-person activities during the pandemic must be prepared for a sudden shut down in the event of new health directives and advisories from the BC government.

COVID-19 Research Studies

We will no longer be prioritizing COVID-19 studies for ethical review unless there are special circumstances. Please contact reb@unbc.ca.

Community-Based Research

COVID-19 has resulted in unprecedented challenges for many communities, including Indigenous communities. Researchers must ensure that appropriate and ongoing consultations are undertaken to determine if research can be accommodated, and researchers should be prepared to pause or postpone research if community needs change. For reference, researchers are asked to refer to the [Culturally Safe and Trauma-Informed Practices for Researchers during COVID-19.pdf \(bcahsn.ca\)](#). This resource was developed by the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) and Research Ethics BC (REBC), part of the BC Academic Health Science Network.

On-Campus Research

We have amended our restart research information grid to include On-campus research, identifying specific requirements for Safe Research Plans. We note that on-campus research can sometimes increase COVID-19 risks and that researchers are asked to mitigate risks as they can.

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