In-Person Research
Safe Research Guidelines for new and resuming research

Insert Date Here

Researchers seeking to conduct in-person research must develop a Safe Research Plan or integrate safety protocols into their Island Health REB ethics application. These guidelines are intended to assist researchers in development of their safety plans. Safety considerations will differ from project to project; factors such as rates of infection, hospitalization, and availability of health services will be taken into consideration. Vaccination status will also be considered. The Safe Research Plan or safety protocols are intended to provide reviewers with more details specific to the conduct of your research and its impact on participants.

Criteria for conducting in person research

The researcher has an obligation to mitigate the risk of infecting research participants. To mitigate Covid-19 risk to participants:

1. Researchers must be fully vaccinated before commencing research.
2. Researchers must conduct a personal health assessment each day that they conduct research, and stay home if they feel ill.
3. Researchers who cannot be vaccinated safely (medical exemption) must take other precautions to mitigate the risk they might pose to their participants, including the use of personal protective equipment.
4. In regions where the impact of COVID-19 infections remains substantial, researchers are advised to avoid engaging with participants for extended periods of time and in closed spaces that are poorly ventilated, or in crowded places, and to avoid close-range conversations.

Steps to completing and managing your Safe Research Plan or safety protocol

1. Review available guidance documents and resources.
2. Assess the risks of your research procedures and methods and consider ways to mitigate risk in the context of COVID-19.
3. Consult with stakeholders, sponsors and participant communities.
4. Attach your plan or safety protocol to your ethics application.
5. Once approved, monitor and amend as needed. Proposed changes will need to be submitted to the REBs for review.

Step 1 | Review Safety Guidance

Be aware that community guidelines, restrictions and practices may vary and will also need to be factored into your Safe Research Plan or safety protocol.

a. Review relevant guidance from organizations such as:
   - British Columbia Public Health Office: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/covid-19/info/response (includes steps for obtaining a BC vaccine card)
   - the BC Center for Disease Control
   - WorkSafeBC
   - The Government of Canada pages: https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/prevention-risks/measures-reduce-community.html#a3
     - For guidance on vulnerable populations: https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/vulnerable-populations-covid-19.html
     - Information on travelling in Canada or abroad https://travel.gc.ca/
   - Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Indigenous communities: https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1581964230816/1581964277298#chap1
   - The Island Health COVID-19 site or Island Health Research Ethics & Compliance COVID-19 site

b. Review the First Nation/Inuit/Métis community websites for the regions where you will be requesting permission to conduct research.

c. Review other guidance specific to your profession or research field that could help with developing risk mitigation strategies.

d. Ensure that you are aware of all relevant public health or other governmental or institutional policies, guidance and regulations pertaining to the location where your research is being conducted.

Step 2 | Draft your Safe Research Plan or safety protocol

An optional template is available, but other forms are acceptable. Please ensure the following sections are included, as needed.

Introduction

- Name of the PI and student (if student project)
- Department / Unit
- Study Jurisdiction (name the province/state/country that sets the public health guidelines for your research area)
- Study Setting/s (E.g. indoor, outdoor, institutional setting, at the participants discretion)

- Study Application Number

Vaccination Status

The PI is responsible for knowing and keeping a confidential record of the vaccination status of study team members who will interact in-person with research participants. Study team members should not be pressured to reveal their status, but it should be requested on a voluntary basis. If a member of the study team chooses not to disclose their status, the PI should reach out to the REBs for consultation. Please contact dawn.pollon@islandhealth.ca (HREB) or karen.medler@islandhealth.ca (CREB) to schedule an appointment. The PI should permanently destroy a vaccination record if someone leaves their research team and when the study is completed. These records should not be stored with research data.

For participants who will have face-to-face interaction with researchers and/or other participants, indicate in the Safe Research Plan whether participants will be asked to disclose their vaccination status and how their status will be verified. If there is only one research visit, a participant's vaccination status should not be recorded. If there are multiple research visits, the researcher may ask the participant if they can keep a record of their status so they do not need to validate vaccination at every visit. The process for this and how these records will be kept confidential and destroyed must be outlined in the Safe Research Plan.

Research Protocols

Describe protocols being put in place to reduce risks of person-to-person or surface transmission. Examples are provided below. **Please only include those that apply to your research.**

1. At-Risk Populations

Describe the risk profile of the research participant group (e.g., age, underlying medical conditions) and how risk will be managed for high risk members of the community.

2. Interviews

Describe safety precautions being used for one-to-one in-person interviews. Consider the conditions within the region where you plan to conduct your research. Many of these prompts will not be necessary in regions where COVID-19 infection rates are low and there are no public health restrictions in place:

- Are physical distancing requirements in place in the region?
- Are non-medical masks required by the researcher and participant?
- Will hand sanitizer and other PPE be provided to participants?

3. Gatherings such as focus groups, collaborative meetings, presentations, research programs or events

- Are any limits in place, such as:
    - on the number of people at a site or gathering at one time?
    - on the number and length of in-person gatherings?
- Will gatherings be held indoors or outdoors?

4. Community Based Research

"Community-based" in this context refers to sustained in-person engagement with research populations over a period of time, beginning prior to the onset of formal data collection.

Describe consultations with the affected communities. Consider the number of participants the researcher will be in contact with.

- Are any requirements for self-isolation in place, particularly when travelling to areas with limited health support services?
- How will the impact of research on local communities be mitigated?
- Have any COVID-specific cleaning protocols been put in place?

5. Research Involving Indigenous Communities

If you have not yet done so, please contact the Indigenous Research Support Initiative (IRSI) for more guidance on understanding how COVID-19 impacts, modifies, or pauses research with(in) Indigenous communities (https://irsi.ubc.ca/).

Community Guidelines

Researchers will need confirmation from the community that it has the capacity to accept research activity (notwithstanding any agreements drafted pre-COVID). In addition to completing the Safe Research Plan or safety protocol, please also provide confirmation of community agreement.

Before attempting to engage or re-engage, verify whether the Indigenous community has issued any guidance regarding their key contacts, capacity, and operations during COVID-19. These may be found on individual community websites, including on social media sites such as Facebook.

Coordinate with any other researchers known to be involved in the community to avoid duplicating outreach.

Use of Technology

To the extent that you are able to reach your contacts in Indigenous communities, you should work with them to determine whether the Indigenous community has the capacity to engage and their preferred method of engagement.

Although such engagement could be facilitated through video-conferencing and virtual town halls with Island Health available resources, communities or individuals within a community may not have the means (such as robust WIFI) to connect. Familiarize yourself with any limitations in the community prior to engagement.

- Work with the local community to determine whether shared access to computer technology is available for those who may not have access in their homes, while ensuring that a protocol for maintaining public health guidelines (physical distancing) can be implemented.

- Discuss with the community, how to maintain regular yet respectful contact.
  - Consider the extent to which you and your team may be able to support Indigenous (or remote) communities by providing surplus medical supplies, protective equipment, and other resources as part of a commitment to reciprocity.

6. Travel and Accommodation

How will travel be managed? Some of these prompts will not be necessary depending on where the research is taking place.

- Consider information regarding current public health status in the country or community of travel as well as current restrictions
- Consider whether travel destinations require a period of quarantine.
- Many remote and Indigenous communities also require that outsiders undergo self-isolation before engaging with the community population. Researchers should ensure that they have the resources to abide by community requirements.

7. Surface Transmission and Personal Protective Equipment

Describe how the risk of COVID-19 transmission will be mitigated in your research setting

- Be aware of infection prevention and control protocols/signage implemented for the location where the research is being conducted, e.g. washrooms, elevators, doorknobs, etc.
- Follow the cleaning protocol provided by the facility.
- Consider whether cleaning supplies will be available.
- For information on personal protective equipment: Island Health PPE Guidelines.

8. Research Team and Participant Safety

Describe how your research team will interact to ensure safety, including as appropriate:

- Steps that will be taken if a study team member or participant becomes sick or develops symptoms.
- Contingency plans for self-isolation, returning home or accessing care locally for research team members who experience worsening symptoms.
- Plans for responding to potential changes to health status in your research area.
- What regular check-ins with team members will occur for the duration of the study?
- COVID Health Check: The health check is required regardless of whether individuals have been vaccinated. The health check is needed for both participants and researchers prior to in-person contact. Please go to this link to find the most current set of self-assessment questions: https://bc.thrive.health/covid19/en.

9. Communications

Describe what communication plans are in place for posting or disseminating your Safe Research Plan or safety protocol.

- Is there a stated requirement that participants let the research team know if they develop symptoms? Will contact information for participants be retained in the event that follow up is needed? (Must be included in the informed consent.)

NB. You will also be required to provide the appropriate Notice of COVID-Related Risks during Research to invitees/participants before they are asked to consent. Information contained in the Notice regarding risks of COVID do not need to be repeated in the consent forms or scripts. The Safe Research Plan template asks for confirmation that the appropriate Notice will be provided; if you are not using the

template provided, please add confirmation in your ethics application that the Notice will be supplied to invitees before they are asked to confirm their consent.

Step 3 | Disseminate, Monitor and Update your Safe Research Plan or safety protocol

- Distribute the Safe Research Plan or safety protocol to the research team.
- Make the plan or safety protocol available as a shared document. Team members can either provide a signature or email confirmation that they have read and understood the contents.
- Inform the Research Ethics Board of changes or unanticipated problems that arise during the research.