Updated COVID Guidelines for AWG and AWG Chapter Field Trips

Rationale for updating Guidelines:

This document updates the March 2021 version of the Guidelines for AWG and AWG Chapter field trips, based on our experience with multi-day field trips since then and increased scientific understanding of how the virus spreads. In addition, new variants of the COVID (SARS CoV-2) virus are more infectious, with illnesses developing over a shorter time, and can infect vaccinated people (although the vaccinations and, especially, the boosters remain effective at helping prevent hospitalization and death). COVID remains a dangerous illness for vulnerable people – including many of the people who are old enough to have the time and money to come on our longer field trips. Moreover, the current vaccines only marginally reduce the potential to develop long-lasting symptoms (“long COVID”), so avoiding infection in the first place remains an important goal. On the plus side, we now have more testing tools, in particular at-home antigen tests, and remarkably efficient masks are now readily available.

The March 2021 Guidelines were intended to help field trip organizers think through how to design and run field trips safely in what we hoped were the waning days of the pandemic. Now that we have more experience running trips in a world where COVID remains a threat, as well as experience with managing a COVID outbreak on a field trip, we’re updating these Guidelines to address measures to limit any COVID outbreak that may occur on a field trip.

We will update these guidelines as the pandemic evolves until (we hope) such guidelines are no longer necessary.

General guidelines for all trips:

We encourage trip planners to consult and follow the CDC’s recommendations for events and gatherings (Considerations for Events and Gatherings | CDC), as well as the recommendations for the local jurisdiction (county, state, country) being visited. (The CDC page includes a link to a directory of state and local health agencies.) Please consult these recommendations during planning and again a few weeks before the trip. If traveling through several states or outside the US, leaders should compile a list of phone numbers for local health authorities and medical facilities to bring along on the trip. In addition, student chapters should follow their university’s guidelines. We encourage organizers to develop a trip-specific COVID plan, especially for any trip that involves group transportation and/or overnight stays, and to make sure all participants are aware of their responsibility to follow it. Participants must agree to follow the COVID protocols established before the trip and any additional measures caused by the occurrence of COVID within the group. Organizers may wish to appoint someone to remind participants of the COVID procedures during the trip.

AWG’s policy is that all trip participants will be fully vaccinated\(^1\), including boosters, to the extent a participant is eligible. Participants should also do their best to avoid situations where they might be exposed to COVID in the week or so before traveling.

\(^1\) A minimum of two weeks have passed after the final shot in the participant’s vaccination protocol.

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If CDC and local recommendations for indoor events can be followed, a museum visit may be included in your field trip, particularly if you can arrange a special tour at a time when the museum isn’t open to the public.

Please bear in mind that this situation continues to evolve, and risk factors may continue to change. For example, COVID variants may arise that are completely resistant to the available vaccines. Therefore, all trips should be designed such that they can be canceled as close to the event as possible while avoiding either AWG, an AWG chapter, or the participants losing much money. If you charge a fee for your field trip, please consider budgeting to allow for at least a partial refund for last-minute cancellations, so as to discourage participants who don’t feel well from attending. For longer trips, encourage (or require in the case of foreign travel) everyone to obtain travel insurance that includes coverage for COVID-related trip cancellation or interruption, isolation expenses, and medical treatment during the trip.

Guidelines for short field trips (3 days or fewer):

Those who are from the same household are encouraged to form a “pod” that may travel, stay, and eat together. AWG advises chapters to run only field trips that can readily allow physical distancing between such pods. By this we mean:

- Each pod is in its own vehicle. Organizers should plan only stops that have sufficient safe parking for the anticipated number of cars, and participants should be warned if any roads are unsuitable for vehicles with low clearance. The vehicles could include rental vans for groups of participants who have been fully vaccinated and choose to form a larger pod, in which case everyone must wear a high-quality well-fitting (N95 or similar – NOT cloth) mask in the vehicles. Windows should be open a bit, as the weather allows.
- Everyone wears a mask whenever in an indoor public space or wherever distancing is not feasible. Masking is optional outdoors, but participants should try to physically distance.
- Everyone spends nights in their own tent or motel room unless staying together with members of a pod as described above.
- Participants don’t eat close together unless with members of their pod. Participants should sit outside or in their cars at lunchtime, and dinners should be eaten outside or in their rooms.
- If camping, any meal preparation should also be physically distanced, so either done alone or within pods. This will likely mean that everyone brings their own food.
- Exceptions to the masking requirement include within pods and outdoors where everyone is fully vaccinated and participants can physically distance (i.e., at outcrops and on day hikes).

Field trips should be located in predominantly rural areas to minimize the potential for contributing to community spread. Even so, participants may come in contact with the general public, who may not be vaccinated or wear masks, e.g., during shopping and bathroom breaks, so consider how any potential contacts related to such activities will be mitigated. Trip organizers should plan to bring extra hand sanitizer, sanitizing wipes, and some disposable masks in case participants lose theirs or run out. A kit for bathroom needs may also be advisable, including bathroom tissue (and a bag for disposal), and
perhaps soap and water for proper hand washing. Participants should avoid eating indoors at crowded restaurants and instead get take-out to eat outside or in their own room or tent.

Please bear in mind that conditions such as asthma and allergies can cause people to cough, sneeze or have a drippy nose normally, so participants should be on the lookout for what are, for them, unusual symptoms. Everyone should take a COVID at-home antigen test before leaving home. Each participant should be asked to bring at least 2 extra antigen tests. A participant who starts to have COVID symptoms, including a scratchy throat, stuffy head, dry cough, or headache, should use an antigen test. However, it’s not uncommon for such tests to produce a false negative result for a day or two into a COVID infection, so that participant should be encouraged to either leave the trip (go home or find someplace where they can isolate) or somehow keep their distance from the rest of the group and be masked whenever around others, including those in their pod, whether indoors or outdoors. Their fellow pod members should also be encouraged to keep their distance from the group and be masked both indoors and outdoors. If others in that pod begin to have symptoms or test positive, the entire pod should leave the trip entirely. Other participants should be encouraged to test a few days following the field trip and report any positive results to the trip organizers.

**Guidelines for longer field trips (4 days or more):**

Everyone attending a longer field trip will be required to show evidence of vaccination as a condition for participation in a field trip. Larger groups where everyone is vaccinated may do trips that aren’t physically distanced within the group, thus allowing for renting vans or buses and eating and rooming together. However, participants may unwittingly bring COVID to a group, especially if traveling to the trip location via a public mode of transportation, e.g., by air, bus, or train. Consequently, everyone must wear a high-quality (N95 or similar) mask in the vehicles until enough time has passed to be reasonably sure that no one contracted COVID before joining the group. The Omicron variants tend to begin causing illness or showing a positive test within about 5 days of exposure, so the requirement for masking inside vehicles may be dropped after that time if no one has become ill or tested positive. However, some windows should be kept open as weather allows.

All participants should test before leaving home, test before first gathering with the group, and then test every other day for the rest of the trip. To the extent possible, accommodations should be double occupancy at most, with the same roommates assigned throughout the trip. For a camping-based trip, participants who aren’t from the same household will bring their own tents and sleep alone.

Participants should be required to bring:

- Enough antigen tests to fulfill the trip testing requirements plus some extras in case COVID arises within the group and more frequent testing requirements are imposed. If someone tests positive, daily testing requirements may be imposed on roommates and other close contacts.
- Enough disposable masks to last through the trip.
- Extra prescription medications in case a participant contracts COVID and isolation prevents returning home as scheduled.
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Participants will still need to be careful to avoid exposure to COVID or contributing to community spread whenever out with the general public, especially now that most masking requirements have been dropped. This means continuing to wear masks, physically distancing, and avoiding eating inside restaurants, especially when around people outside your group. Group restaurant meals may be planned, but only for after the initial van-masking period and only if the group can be in their own room or seated outdoors. Participants should have the option of picking up food and taking it outside or to their room to eat.

If a participant develops COVID symptoms and tests positive, they will need to leave the trip and isolate at their own expense for 5 days starting the day after symptoms appear, or longer if mandated by local health authorities. They may not rejoin the trip until they are symptom free and test negative; in practice, this means they likely won’t be able to rejoin at all since people typically continue to test positive for several days after symptoms go away. An exception may be made if a person has finished the COVID isolation period, is symptom-free and everyone else on the trip agrees to allow that person to rejoin even though they still test positive. Masking requirements will be reimposed for everyone in that person’s vehicle and in the roommate’s vehicle.

If a participant develops COVID symptoms but tests negative, they should find separate accommodations, if possible, and they and their roommate should test daily. They may remain with the field trip but must be masked at all times with the group, as should everyone riding in the same vehicle. If testing is still negative on the third day of symptoms, it’s likely a cold or allergies, but masking should continue until symptoms are gone to protect the rest of the group from illness.

If possible, trip organizers should arrange for more than one geologic leader on a trip or someone local who could step in if a leader develops COVID symptoms. Each geologic leader should have their own separate accommodations to the extent possible. The trip organizer should recruit a back-up trip runner and arrange for access to all trip planning documents, i.e., hard copies in a binder that could be handed over or on a Google Drive. If a leader develops COVID symptoms and must leave the trip, and no back-up leader is available, the participants will need to vote as to whether to continue the trip with no geologic leader. Each rented van should have more than one approved driver, so that participants will not be stranded.

Participants should be encouraged to test 3-4 days following the field trip and report any positive results to the trip organizers. Trip leaders will assist participants impacted by COVID (or a COVID scare) as much as they can without unduly impacting the rest of the trip. However, participants are responsible for any costs related to contracting COVID while on an AWG field trip and should carry travel insurance that includes coverage for trip interruption and any other costs related to leaving the trip. These may include lodging, transportation costs (including rebooking flights) and any medical costs. Participants should not expect any reimbursement from AWG for the portion of the trip not attended.