

## Return to Research FAQs

Please note, “Department chair/dean” is used below to represent the person who is responsible for return to research decision making in your unit. This could be a center director or other unit leader in some cases.

Please consult the [One VCU: Responsible Together](#) webpage and associated FAQs for questions that have a broader scope than research.

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## **Section 1: General Research Operations**

### 1.1: Returning to Research

Q: Who will approve my return?

A: Each unit is responsible for coordinating, reviewing and approving plans for the return to research. Please watch for communications from your unit's leadership for instructions. Units have established Return to Campus Coordinators to execute the return to campus according to the university's plans.

Q: What should I do if I feel an exception to the return to research plan is needed?

A: Consult with your department chair/dean on how to have a plan approved.

### 1.2: Supplies

Q: Will there be a university supply of PPE, or is each lab expected to order their own?

A: While we are aware that PPE is in short supply, the university does not have current plans to obtain enough to meet all university needs. Labs should secure their own PPE as they are able to do so.

Q: Will the university offer laundry service for lab coats or face coverings?

A: No. Individuals will be responsible for maintaining their own supplies.

### 1.3: Facilities/Safety Measures

Q: What type of enforcement will there be for the health and safety measures required by the University?

A: Department and School leadership are expected to assist with the enforcement of the health and safety measures. Polite reminders to "please mask up" or "six feet please" are suggested since these are new measures that we all must adjust to. Should issues arise, individuals are urged to contact Security or VCU Police. VCU will be providing additional training for Security/Police to ensure they have the ability to successfully navigate some of these anticipated issues. Look for data from HR on repercussions.

Q: Some members of my research staff are not comfortable returning to campus. What are the options available?

A: Staff members should be permitted to do as much work as possible remotely. For activities that must be completed on campus, we suggest working as a group to develop accommodating assignments and schedules. It may be possible to have those able to come to campus to complete work in the laboratory that would normally be accomplished by another and those who cannot come to campus complete the analysis, etc. Flexibility with schedules, assignments, and planning can be productive. In addition, there are various leave allocations available for employees. Please see the HR [Return to Campus](#) webpage for additional information.

Q: I never received a safety kit as described in the Return to Campus Plan. How do I get one?

A: Please check [here](#) to find your Return to Campus Coordinator (RTCC). Your RTCC can provide a safety kit.

Q: What is the procedure for testing employees for COVID-19? How frequently can tests be conducted and how quickly will we receive results?

Staff member with COVID-19-like symptoms

1. Notify supervisor
2. Call VCU EHS COVID-19 Hot line 628-2594. Hours are 7AM - 7 PM M-F; 7AM - 5 PM Sat/Sun.
3. EHS COVID-19 Hot line will give the staff member guidance on testing and parameters of quarantining and guidance on when to return to work.

Staff member with exposure to someone who has COVID-19 or COVID-19 like symptoms

1. Notify supervisor
2. Call VCU EHS COVID-19 Hot line 628-2594. Hours are 7AM - 7 PM M-F; 7AM - 5 PM Sat/Sun.
3. EHS COVID-19 Hot line will give the staff member guidance if their exposure is considered significant enough to warrant at home quarantining or their need to be tested.
  - o Guidance on if they should be tested will be given by the Hot line.
  - o Staff will be asked to give their supervisor's name and email address.

If a staff member is positive - What does that mean for staff who work closely with that person

- If the area is practicing social distancing, splitting shifts, cleaning and disinfecting common spaces on a daily basis and wearing masks, non symptomatic staff members continue to work and self monitor daily.

LEAVE Guidance

Below is the link to the VCU COVID Leave page. Please review.

<https://hr.vcu.edu/media/hr/guides/EmergencyLeaveGuidanceforAllEmployees7.29.20.pdf>

- Staff or family member tested - Negative results
  - o Can only use Public Health Emergency Leave (PHEL) for days awaiting testing
  - o If they continue to feel bad but receive a negative result then they can use their own leave to cover.
- Staff member tested - Positive results
  - o Family First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA)

Q: Where can we find VCU-approved disinfection standards and procedures for in-lab disinfection that should be applied as different workers use the same space/equipment?

A: Please refer to the FMD website.

Q: There are concerns about specific outdoor areas and how they will be treated. For example, where people sometimes sit or stand at the stop lights, or are on ledges and benches or wait for

their rides to pick them up outside of the hospital. It's generally pretty tight and it's often difficult to navigate through those groups as it relates to physical distancing. Are there any ways that these outdoor shared spaces can be addressed?

A: The governor of Virginia is not mandating face coverings outside, and VCU is following that lead so face coverings are not required when VCU employees or students are outside. However, we are required to maintain social distance outside, when we're eating, and when we're interacting. If you're concerned about the outside gatherings at the stoplights while you're waiting to cross the street or you're walking in one of the tight walkways around our campus, you can wear a mask. Many individuals are wearing masks outside.

#### 1.4: Capacity

Q: What is the current permitted occupancy in laboratories?

A: Laboratories are permitted 2 people per 250 sq. ft. as of July 16, 2020. Face coverings and frequent hand washing is required. Check the Return to Campus/Return to Research pages for updated information.

Q: What examples can you provide as options for laboratory activity?

A: Some faculty have developed on-line calendar sign-up sheets so research staff and graduate students can sign up for specific times in the laboratory convenient to them to meet the occupancy requirements. Other faculty have assigned teams to work together to accomplish specific tasks. Regular group meetings on Zoom and shared Google folders help to keep everyone informed. We recognize that this is not simple nor will it get most groups to 100%, but these methods certainly improve productivity.

Q: Will social distancing guidelines be updated as new information is available about COVID-19 and its spread?

A: VCU's Public Health Response Team continues to monitor all data from available resources. Guidance will be updated as information becomes available.

#### 1.5: Personnel and Collaboration

Q: Will any allowances be given for arrival times? The wait time for shuttle buses for those of us who have to park in satellites like A lot, for example, will most likely be longer since they can only be filled at 50% capacity.

A: Every employee should talk to and work with their manager. This is a really difficult time for everyone, and those kinds of allowances absolutely would be recommended from Human Resources. The Human Resources Professionals are doing a fantastic job of trying to assist managers who have a lot of these questions. We are suggesting flexing work schedules and working out a hybrid telework schedule for those folks who do want to get back into the office for a limited period of time.

Q: Engaging my research team and collaboration have been difficult in a remote setting. Are there any resources or tips to improve virtual communication?

A: Reengaging in the process does take effort on the part of all. Regularly scheduled meetings for the entire team are strongly encouraged. Ensuring that all team members are available at the scheduled time is important. Doodle polls can be helpful to identify agreeable times. Use of Zoom's breakout rooms to discuss specific issues and then returning to the full group for reconnaissance is also beneficial. The CTLE and HR each have additional resources available

for successful remote work. The following links offer additional ideas and resources for successful remote work:

<https://telework.vcu.edu/>

<https://collaborate.vcu.edu/about-us/remote-teaching-and-working/>

<https://rampages.us/facultyresources/group-work-collaboration/>

### 1.6: OVPRI Operations

Q: What is the anticipated return date for sponsored programs, staff shifts, and schedule?

A: OSP is fortunate in that we were really experienced with telework. Prior to all of this, we had a significant number of staff that were teleworking on some kind of basis. So our staff has been working remotely since the telework period with no disruption to service. Continuing as normal, you can contact us the same way you would have contacted us previously. In terms of returning to campus, we're going to continue to work remotely for the time being. We're currently scheduled to be a phase four return. And we'll see what that means as we go through this process. This should be seamless to PIs and staff and various individuals because you're just going to continue to contact us like you would, and you probably won't know whether we're in the office or not. You'll call us the same way you did, or you'll send us an email the same way you did.

### 1.7: Students/Trainees

Q: When can undergraduate students return to the laboratory?

A: Undergraduate students may return to research activities when they return to campus. All university training, health and safety requirements must continue to be met. Students should be added to BioRaft profiles for laboratories.

### 1.8: Funding/Administration

Q: When will startup and research funds be available to me?

A: Fund allocation and availability remains at the discretion of the department/school. We suggest you reach out to your department chair and research administrator to learn more about fund availability.

Q: When is a PI able to purchase/request reimbursements for travel?

A: This depends; contact your department or school.

### 1.9: Receiving Packages

Q: My laboratory needs to be assured that research materials and samples can be ordered and received in a timely way. With the building being locked, deliveries are a problem. What should I do?

A: Reaching out to your building manager is an excellent way to learn of the plans for your particular building. Building managers should be able to assist in developing a plan for accepting deliveries, etc. Building Manager lists are available here:

- **Monroe Park Campus Return-to-Campus Coordinators and Building Managers**

- **MCV Campus Return-to-Campus Coordinators and Building Managers**

## **Section 2: Human Subjects/Clinical Research**

### **2.1: Recruitment and Participant Interactions**

Q: Recruiting participants for clinical research when most visits are occurring by telemedicine is difficult. What resources are available to assist us in recruitment?

A: The Wright Center for Clinical and Translational Research has several resources available to assist current and potential study participants. These resources can be found at <https://ctr.vcu.edu/support/study-participation-and-recruitment/>. If you need further assistance or would like to consult with our recruitment specialist, please email us at [ctrrecruit@vcu.edu](mailto:ctrrecruit@vcu.edu).

Q: My research is based on participants in everyday situations, such as school or daily activities. Since behaviors have changed dramatically in the pandemic, I cannot conduct my planned research. What should I do?

A: You may want to speak with your research administrator for additional information. If your research is funded, you should reach out to your sponsor to explain the situation to determine next steps. It may be possible to revise your scope of work or pause this particular project to a more appropriate date. If the research is unfunded, it may be some time before such research can be conducted.

Q: Are we currently allowed to approach subjects in inpatient and outpatient clinics for research studies as long as they're on that list?

A: This is a bit more complex. If you are working on a study that's in VCU Health, that doesn't necessarily mean that you should feel emboldened to go up to anyone. Contact the clinic staff and ask them about their traffic patterns. Some facilities, for example, may have people wait outside and only come into the clinic when called to come in. Ultimately, this needs to be handled on a case-by-case basis with clinic staff. Strong communication with clinic staff is encouraged.

Q: What resources are available to help minimize face to face interaction with research participants?

A: See FAQ#23 of the [VCU Human Research Protection Program Q&A](#) for remote consenting resources and processes. Other University technology resources may be available through Technology Services, the ALT Lab, and VCU Libraries that could assist researchers.

Q: When can I resume research that has in-person interactions with students as participants?

A: Research may likely resume in the fall when students return to campus.

### **2.2: Clinical Research Operations**

Q: My research only requires data entry when people arrive for clinical visits, but I have not been able to restart my research. When will this type of research be able to begin again?

A: Please contact Mary Harmon, Director of Clinical Research at VCU Health - [Mary.Harmon@vcuhealth.org](mailto:Mary.Harmon@vcuhealth.org) for additional information.

Q: Are there any recommendations of how and when research teams should be asking their pre-screening questions as far as COVID-19 goes prior to their in-person visits? Are there requirements for testing research participants? How can we get those tests done?

A: Check with your sponsors to determine if they are offering to pay for COVID-19 testing. There are testing sites that are run by VCU Health including mobile testing sites. Before a participant visits campus, study staff should conduct your general screening questions that were included in your training. These questions are included in the Reboarding training: How have you been feeling? Have you been potentially exposed? Additional questions are on the VCU Health check-in list, including travel outside of the region or to hot regions.

Q: What about studies where both participants and study staff may be in more high exposure situations?

A: A treadmill study would be a good example of this. Study staff should reach out to sponsors and ask about the ability to cover testing. VCU Health can provide these tests. Please contact Joan Greer in VCUHS at [joan.greer@vcuhealth.org](mailto:joan.greer@vcuhealth.org). Joanie is the point of contact for both access to testing and access to specialized PPE within VCUHS. North 8 is ensuring that orders are made for testing so that you can take advantage of the mobile testing sites. Joanie is also the point of contact for receiving the specialized PPE that might be required to access a clinical setting. Many situations require the use of a face shield. Once your name is added to the list by Joanie, a face shield can be picked up at the former Au Bon Pain kiosk that's across from the cafeteria.

Q: Is it correct to assume that we should start with drug dependent trials and continue to do natural history studies remotely if possible?

A: Trials that have potentially therapeutic benefits should be considered. Other studies like observational studies or natural history studies are just as important in terms of answering your research questions. They are highly valued by the institution. This is why we chose to take an approach that was more a percentage occupancy, putting safety over valuing risk. Where research can still be done remotely, it should be. And if it cannot, discuss the appropriate time to return to it safely with your department chair..

Q: Regarding phase 2, I agree that prioritizing participants who have already had clinic visits occur in the health system reduces the impact of onsite research participants. I wonder if it is possible to expand this definition to include participants who have had health system exposure in the prior 7 days? This would not significantly increase the risk so long as the site of the research visit and clinic was the same.

A: Deans and department chairs can weigh the risk of allowing this population on campus as they make their decisions about who will be allowed on campus and how occupancy limits will be met.

### 2.3: IRB and COVID-related Amendments

Q: What is the IRB timeline for approving amendments to COVID contingency plans?

A: The IRB prioritizes all COVID contingency plans. Turnaround time varies based on a number of factors including the responsiveness of the study team or PI. Individuals are encouraged to monitor RAMS-IRB and respond to questions and requests as quickly as possible. Questions should be addressed to the assigned IRB coordinator.

Q: If we are continuing to do some remote visits, do we need to amend the protocols for this? There will be a mix of in-person and remote visits.

A: Your obligations to the IRB are the same as they were before COVID-19. If you are going to be changing anything about your protocol that isn't currently IRB approved, you should submit an amendment to us to make changes to facilitate the resumption of your research. A previously approved COVID contingency protocol that is going to be changed with the return should be amended with a revised COVID contingency protocol. However, if you are intending to permanently revise your approved smartform to incorporate remote visits, you should submit an amendment to your current protocol. The general advice is to look at the smartform and look at your contingency protocol if you have one. If you're doing anything differently than what is approved, you should be submitting an amendment.

Q: Is there an expiration date for the COVID-specific protocols?

A: There is no expiration date for the COVID-specific protocols. The COVID-19 contingency protocols will be in effect until indicated otherwise. A contingency protocol can be retired by logging a public comment in the record indicating the retirement. The retirement will imply that the study is returning to its currently approved smartform protocol. If there will be changes to the currently approved smartform protocol, an amendment must be submitted and approved before the study makes those changes. There is guidance on the [Return to Research webpage](#) that includes flow charts that will walk you through what your obligations to the IRB are during this time and some written guidance as well. These documents will clarify what to do to retire your contingency protocol or to modify it as appropriate.

Q: Are the tiers still applicable at this time?

A: The tiers are not applicable at this time. The committee that crafted this return to research plan did consider having studies return to campus according to their tier. However, many studies did not provide tier information to the IRB as requested. It was decided that it would be better to use a different strategy to reopen research so that each department had the most flexibility in deciding who should return when.

Q: What do I need to submit to the IRB?

A: Investigators should review their approved smartforms, documents, and any IRB approved COVID-19 contingency protocols to determine whether any changes need to be submitted to the IRB in an amendment. See the [VCU Human Research Protection Program Q&A](#) for more information about study modifications.

Q: If the IRB approves my study/amendment, may I return to campus for research?

A: No, approval must be obtained from your Dean/Department Chair for research to return to campus. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the IRB expects the research will proceed in accordance with other institutional policies (such as this Return to Research plan) and as outlined in the IRB submission. IRB approval does not automatically mean that your research may proceed.

#### 2.4: Research Locations and Safety Measures

Q: If I need to have less physical distance or use of protective equipment to conduct the research, what is the process for getting that approved?

A: Investigators should consult with OEHS about proper procedures.

Q: Our lab spaces are small and having 1 researcher and 1 participant would surpass the 1 person per 250 sq ft recommendation. Do all requests for exceptions go to the Dean's office for



initial approval or is it understood that our lab research would not meet the physical distancing recommendation guidelines?

A: Investigators should work with OEHS to identify alternative controls, and ultimately the Dean would have to approve the plan for returning to campus and in-person visits.

Q: When may I return to off-campus locations to conduct my research?

A: Return of research to off-campus locations is subject to the protocols and guidelines of the other location(s).

Q: If there is a shared space within a building where I would have appointments for study participants (e.g. a conference room, shared lab, etc.), how can I gain access to that space?

A: Permission would need to be coordinated among your Return to Campus Coordinator and Building Manager and the Building Manager where the space is located.

Q: Is it expected that our studies conducted on the Monroe Park Campus require a COVID-19 test for research participants?

A: There is currently no requirement for viral testing for visitors or research subjects prior to coming to university facilities, though the medical campus (due to their clinical requirements related to the medical center) may have added requirements. There is an expectation however, that investigators will advise the subjects not to come to campus if they are sick or have symptoms of COVID-19.

### **Section 3: Animal Subjects/Division of Animal Resources**

Q: Limited capacity in expanding breeding colonies and other DAR limitations are delaying my research. When can I expect operations to return to pre-COVID-19 timelines?

A: Current Guidelines for re-establishing breeding colonies during VCU's Return to Research initiative:

- Initiation of active breeding in animal breeding colonies may only occur once VCU has entered the Return to Research phase, and the PI and their staff have been authorized to return to campus.
- Plan for a gradual restart to breeding. Setting up a large number of simultaneous matings will result in a large number of simultaneous litters that will need to be weaned over a short period of time.
- PIs should communicate with the Vivarium Manager to share their plans to restart breeding to ensure adequate caging and other resources will be available.
- Be mindful of creating a burden on the lab staff who would carry out weaning, genotyping, and downstream experimentation on large numbers of animals produced by a large number of simultaneous matings.

Should you have specific concerns, please reach out to Mark Bates (mcbates@vcu.edu) to discuss.

Q: What are the PPE requirements for animal rooms?

A: PPE will remain the same. Cloth masks may not be worn in animal rooms; disposable ear loop masks will be available for use. PPE supply points will be relocated to secure locations to minimize unauthorized use.

Q: How many people can work simultaneously in an animal room?

A: The maximum room occupancy will be posted on the exterior of all animal holding spaces. In general, expect most rooms to have a maximum occupancy of two people. This may exceed the university's guidance on maximum personnel density. This risk is mitigated by the PPE occupants are required to wear, the high air changes in the rooms and the routine frequent decontamination of high touch areas.

Q: Given that most animal surgeries and cell culture research requires hair covering, masks, lab coats and gloves, can an exception be made to the 250 square feet rule?

A: Exceptions must be detailed in a plan that is approved by your department chair/dean and university leadership.

#### **Section 4: Field and Off-site Research**

Q: When can I resume travel to my field research locations, including in rural areas?

A: Per the University faculty and staff One VCU:Responsible Together webpage:

**University-sponsored international travel is suspended until further notice.** This includes faculty, staff and students.

**University-sponsored domestic travel out of state for clinical and research purposes is permissible with the approval** of the senior vice president for health sciences or the provost based on your campus assignment. It is strongly suggested that you check the destination to determine any restrictions or quarantine requirements.

Members of the VCU community are encouraged to limit personal travel. We encourage students and employees to refer to the [CDC](#) and [U.S. Department of State](#) to be fully informed of potential health risks and travel restrictions that may be in place.

Q: When can I return to my field/off-site research?

A: This is dependent on any current VCU or state travel restrictions, the location of the research (indoor/outdoor), restrictions of the study-site and compliance with VCU's return to research and campus plan. A researcher must coordinate with their department chair/dean to determine when they may engage in field/off site research.

Q: Does student research placement in external agency laboratories qualify as field research? What if the agency is a state/federal laboratory that is deemed "essential" and is adhering to required state/federal mandates?

A: Yes, this is considered field research and would be subject to VCU's travel restrictions.

Q: Understanding that out-of-state travel has been suspended, are there guidelines for in-state conference travel?

A: All travel must be approved by a department chair/dean and any travel restrictions currently in place for VCU.

#### **Section 5: Basic Science**

##### 5.1: Staffing/Students

Q: Not having undergraduate students is hindering my ability to conduct research. When are we going to be able to bring in undergraduate students to the research labs? And if they cannot return, what recommendations do you have for staffing?

A: We do not expect undergraduates to be in research labs at this time. Graduate and professional students are just beginning to come back on the Health Sciences Campus and in certain pockets on the Monroe Park campus. Undergraduate students are expected to return later in Phase III, during the month of August.

## 5.2: Facilities and Safety Measures

Q: How is occupancy determined for the laboratories in the 25/50/85% plan?

A: Laboratory occupancy will consist of one person per 250 sq feet (2B), two people per 250 square feet (2C), three or four people for 250 square feet (2D). Any exceptions must be presented in a written plan and be approved by your department chair/dean and university leadership.

Q: Will inspection of a research lab by any entity at VCU (OEHS, etc.) be required prior to reopening a lab?

A: Return to Campus Coordinators and Building Managers will be working with Chairs and Deans to ensure spaces are ready for those returning to campus. Individuals will need to obtain that approval prior to an actual return to campus.

Q: Will PIs be asked to submit an individualized, lab-specific return to research plan before reopening their labs? If so, will guidelines for what to include or a template be provided?

A: Department chairs/deans will determine the appropriate procedures and documentation needed for labs to reopen. These requirements will vary across the university, except for mandated return to work training about safety provided by VCU HR.

Q: What will be required for an employee to return to the laboratory?

A: Individual (all employees) and management (for PIs) online training. All personnel must have cloth face masks as well as access to disinfectants (e.g., 70% ethanol).

Q: May seminars and research meetings be held in person?

A: Seminars and research meetings are encouraged to be conducted virtually to ensure social distancing rules are followed. All meetings must comply with published university-level guidelines.

## 5.3: Equipment

Q: My research requires shared instruments and limited access to these is hindering research productivity. What guidance is available to improve access to shared resources?

A: It is strongly suggested to speak with the chair of the department that owns the equipment to work out time to access the equipment.

## **Section 6: Core Research Facilities**

Q: When will core labs reopen?

A: Core labs, service centers and studios will reopen with the initial phase of Return to Research, and this reopening will be phased in a manner that is consistent with general guidance (25%, 50%, 85%).

Q: Who will be allowed to submit samples to cores and service centers for analysis?

A: Only those individuals who are permitted to be on campus at the current phase of reopening will be allowed to submit samples. Users may be required to demonstrate to the facility manager or director that they are suitably authorized.

Q: Will there be restrictions on access during the reopening?

A: In general, users of cores, service centers, and studios should anticipate that availability of these resources will remain constrained owing to limited availability of staff, ongoing requirements for distancing, and overall limitations with respect to building and room occupancy.

Q: Will there be special requirements above and beyond what is required for accessing a building in place to make use of these facilities?

A: Special procedures for instrument decontamination, sample or job submission, interaction with facility staff, or enhanced PPE requirements may be in place, and will be individualized according to the needs of a particular facility.

Q: Core facilities have not been as open and accessible as needed to effectively conduct research. When will full operations resume?

A: Core facilities are operating at the capacity currently permitted for University facilities. Additional updates are being made to the Core Facilities accordion on the Return to Research webpage.

Q: When will Cabell Library reopen?

A: The Library is now open: <https://www.library.vcu.edu/covid19/>

## **Section 7: Other Concerns**

### 7.1: Childcare/Teaching

Q: Having young children at home has severely limited my ability to conduct research. How will the university accommodate for this unavoidable limitation?

A: Please see VCU Human Resources' webpage entitled [Resources for Working Parents](#).

Q: My teaching responsibilities have increased and are limiting my research productivity. What guidance do you have for this situation?

A: Please work with your supervisor, department chair, and research administrator to determine what options are available to you.

### 7.2: Productivity/Promotion/Performance Metrics

Q: I am concerned that my promotion and performance metrics will be negatively affected by decreased research productivity due to COVID-19. In some cases, I am still catching up on work that was cancelled when the university shut down. How will decreased research productivity impact performance assessments?

A: Principal investigators should meet with their department chairs to further discuss extensions of their review cycle. If an individual has concerns about their specific situation, please meet with your supervisor to discuss.

Q: The current level of productivity in the midst of the pandemic may not be sustainable. How often will the university reassess research capacity and make adjustments to its guidance?

A: The Public Health Response Team and ICT Executive Committee meet regularly to review data and discuss concerns. Assessments are ongoing and will be implemented as determined necessary.