



## Department of Health

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Dear Colleagues:

Last year, we began the summer of 2020 with extreme concern about how the months to come would affect the course of COVID-19 in New York State. In the wake of the initial COVID wave, we took cautious steps forward into a phased approach to reopening, sector by sector, based on regional trends in new cases.

One year later, our footing against the virus is much stronger, and the outlook for this summer much brighter. The progress we've made is thanks to the availability of three safe and effective vaccines, the diligence of all New Yorkers in preventing the spread of COVID-19, and the dedication and service of all of you – New York State's healthcare workforce. Though we're not out of the woods yet, the coming months promise to be a refreshing return to so much of what we love about summertime in New York.

This month, I'd like to discuss the importance of engaging in safe outdoor physical activity during these summer months, recognize the need for all New Yorkers to support their physical and mental health, and emphasize the need for us all – especially healthcare providers – to heal and recover as we continue to process this past year and a half.

Each May, we recognize **National Physical Fitness and Sports Month**, and this year's celebration is an especially important time for all of us to prioritize our commitment to our physical health. COVID-19 has upended countless parts of our daily lives, including the way that we move our bodies throughout the day.

Fortunately, there is no better time than the spring and summer months to engage in outdoor physical activity, which remains the safest way to exercise despite the reduced risk of contracting COVID-19. In contrast to most indoor spaces, fresh air in outdoor spaces is constantly moving and quickly dispersing droplets and aerosols. Additionally, studies have shown that UV radiation may decrease the viability of SARS-CoV-2 particles outdoors.<sup>1,2</sup>

The outdoor activities with the lowest risk of COVID-19 exposure remain the ones that you can participate in while maintaining safe distance from others: walking or running, hiking, biking, golfing, boating, or socially-distanced outdoor fitness classes. Thankfully, due to the declining rates of COVID-19 in New York and around the country, in part due to the success of our vaccination program, it will be possible to safely engage in many summer activities for the first time since 2019 – especially if you are vaccinated.

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<sup>1</sup> Shanna Ratnesar-Shumate, et al. Simulated Sunlight Rapidly Inactivates SARS-CoV-2 on Surfaces, *The Journal of Infectious Diseases*, Volume 222, Issue 2, 15 July 2020, Pages 214–222, <https://doi.org/10.1093/infdis/jiaa274>

<sup>2</sup> Paolo Luzzatto-Fegiz, et al. UVB Radiation Alone May Not Explain Sunlight Inactivation of SARS-CoV-2, *The Journal of Infectious Diseases*, Volume 223, Issue 8, 15 April 2021, Pages 1500–1502, <https://doi.org/10.1093/infdis/jiab070>

As our children prepare for camp this summer, New York State has also issued [updated guidance](#) for the operation of child care, day camps, and overnight camps. This guidance includes processes for preventing the spread of COVID-19 in these settings, protocols for testing, and considerations for vaccinated and unvaccinated campers and staff. We are grateful and excited that the progress over the past year will allow us to proceed with camps safely again, allowing our children to benefit from the many physical, social, and psychological benefits that going to camp has to offer.

Our physical fitness is not the only aspect of health needing to be highlighted in the wake of these past 15 months. Throughout May, we also recognize **Mental Health Awareness Month** to emphasize the importance of the role mental health plays in our wellbeing. This is a time for us to recommit ourselves to fighting the stigma surrounding mental illness, supporting those of us living with a mental illness, and educating all New Yorkers about the importance of honest, judgment-free conversations about our mental health. You can read more about Mental Health Awareness Month from the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#).

Our time living through COVID-19 has been incredibly isolating for so many of us, and the effects of COVID-19 have impacted the mental health of New Yorkers in numerous ways. Stressors to our mental health have included worries about exposure to COVID-19 for ourselves or our families but have been compounded by the loss of our social interactions, grief over the loss of loved ones, and stressors related to employment or childcare. Additionally, many essential workers including healthcare personnel have experienced increased job-related stress and anxiety. During the pandemic, over [four in ten US adults](#) reported symptoms of anxiety or depression, up from one in ten before the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

Mental illness represents a widespread health concern in New York State, and gaps in access to mental health care have existed long before COVID-19. In the year prior to the pandemic, it was estimated that [nearly 3 million New Yorkers](#) age 18+ lived with a mental illness – over 19 percent of the state’s adult population – however, only 2.4 million New York adults accessed mental health services.<sup>4</sup> More than [200,000 children in New York](#) State also live with a serious mental health condition.<sup>5</sup> Accessing mental health care has been made more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic, and New York State took steps early on to provide mental healthcare providers with flexibility to deliver services via telehealth. However, this work is anything but finished. Throughout and after the pandemic, we will continue to work to ensure all New Yorkers can access quality, timely, and affordable mental health care wherever they live.

Healthcare professionals and first responders have borne a disproportionate burden of work-related stress and anxiety caused by COVID-19. From the early days last spring, we have known that healthcare workers have experienced increases in symptoms of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress, due to COVID-19.<sup>6,7</sup> The full

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<sup>3</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation; CDC

<sup>4</sup> SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2018 and 2019; US Census Bureau

<sup>5</sup> New York State Health Foundation; NAMI

<sup>6</sup> Lai J, Ma S, Wang Y, et al. Factors Associated With Mental Health Outcomes Among Health Care Workers Exposed to Coronavirus Disease 2019. JAMA Netw Open. 2020;3(3):e203976. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.3976

<sup>7</sup> Rossi R, Socci V, Pacitti F, et al. Mental Health Outcomes Among Frontline and Second-Line Health Care Workers During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic in Italy. JAMA Netw Open. 2020;3(5):e2010185. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.10185

extent of mental and psychological effects of COVID-19 on all New Yorkers, but especially first responders, will take years to be realized. As New York State's healthcare workforce, we urge you to take concrete steps to take care of yourself – whether that mean taking advantage of [online resources](#), talking to someone at your organization, or simply taking time for yourself to exercise, cook a healthy meal, meditate, or just sleep. Above all, know that you are not alone.

The Department of Health will continue to seek to understand and take actions responding to the full extent of mental and psychological damage resulting from COVID-19. The dedication and resolve of our entire healthcare workforce got us through the darkest months of 2020 and has always been essential to the fabric of our society. A special thank you goes out this month to New York State's nurses, as we recognized **National Nurses Week** early in May, as well as to New York State's EMS workforce during **National EMS Week**, from May 15 – 21. On behalf of the entire New York State Department of Health, thank you for the work you do every day to safeguard the health of all New Yorkers.

And one more update you are probably aware of, on May 19, New York State adopted the [CDC's Interim Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People](#) for most businesses and public settings. Businesses still have the ability to require masks and social distancing, and the Department of Health strongly recommends that masks and six feet of social distancing are maintained in indoor settings when vaccination status is not known. Certain settings including healthcare facilities, nursing homes, schools, public transit, and correctional facilities are exempt and must continue following the State's existing guidelines. [Click here](#) to read more about New York State's implementation of the updated CDC guidance.

The Department of Health remains committed to supporting the physical and mental well-being of all New York State healthcare workers in the months and years to come. I hope that your summer may be one of rejuvenation, of healing, and of reunion with the people and places you love.

Sincerely,



Howard A. Zucker, M.D., J.D.  
Commissioner of Health