

Recommendation on COVID-Safe Physical Activity
(Specific to Fitness Centre)
as of 25.3.2022 12:00

Background:

Being physically active is one of the efficacious strategies to strengthen the immune system of human body ^[1]. The improved immune functions can get rid of severe COVID-19 outcomes among infected adults. ^{[2],[3]} Long-term closures of fitness centres, sports premises and recreational facilities have not only deterred the participation of physical activities, but also shaved the human rights to doing physical exercise from the general public.

Some of the general public are impatient to break the physical constraints imposed on the outdoor facilities of the public parks and the sports courts in order to do their workouts stealthily, whereas some gym operators and trainers bring their heavy training equipment along and go to open spaces to do the workouts with their trainees. Such behaviors are considered rather dangerous and inappropriate, despite understandable reasons. There is a surging need to reopen fitness centres, sports premises and recreational facilities, hoping to meet the genuine needs of the general public with safer exercise venues. As the benefits of reopening such premises would obviously outweigh their harm, it is advisable for the Government to have thorough deliberations to review the existing policy. In this connection, public interest definitely warrants this effort.

In regard to the closures and the reopening of fitness centres, sports premises and recreational facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, the authorities are currently adopting an “all-or-none” approach. Such approach impacts the industry adversely and makes the operators, the employees and the patrons frustrated and even despaired. More than 150 gyms are facing the grim reality of shutdown, including two major gym franchises, leaving more than ten thousand employees without job. ^[4]

The authorities are strongly proposed to make reference to the following suggestions and allow the operators of fitness centres and sports premises to have better preparation for adjusting the modes of operating their businesses during the pandemic.

Principles:

Depending on the severity of the COVID-19 outbreak, it is strongly recommended that the authorities should adopt a multi-staged policy to regulate the operation of fitness centres and sports premises. Physical Fitness Association of Hong Kong, China proposes a four-level operation system, ranging from Level 1 to Level 4, for consideration. In accordance with the spread of infectious diseases, a certain degree of restrictions and infectious control measures will be imposed on the operation of fitness centres. The restrictions and control measures will include but not limit to head count, distancing, size of training group or unit, degree of body contact, mode of training, mask-on requirement, body temperature monitoring, disinfection, ventilation, COVID rapid testing, vaccination requirement, contact tracing, facility restriction and so on.

Operation system:

The adoption of different levels in the proposed multi-staged system could be bench-marked against factors, including but not limited to the actual spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the social distancing rule imposed on the catering premises. The following table highlights the requirements established on a variety of modes of practice in the proposed operation system.

	Level 1 Operation under Mild Control	Level 2 Operation under Moderate Control	Level 3 Operation under Severe Control	Level 4 Mandatory Closure
Maximum number of head counts [Note 1]	Machine-based training: 80% of full capacity	Machine-based training: 60% of full capacity	Machine-based training: 40% of full capacity	N/A
Minimum floor area per person [Note 2]	Matwork training: 30 sq ft / person Dance / other group training: 50 sq ft / person	Matwork training: 40 sq ft / person Dance / other group training: : 60 sq ft / person	Matwork training: 50 sq ft / person Dance / other group training: 70 sq ft / person	N/A
Degree of body contact	Body contact among trainers and trainees should be reduced as appropriate.	Body contact among trainers and trainees should be minimal.	Body contact among trainers and trainees should be prohibited.	N/A
Unit / Group size	Every training unit should not exceed 8 people.	Every training unit should not exceed 4 people.	Every training unit should not exceed 2 people.	N/A
Distance between units/ groups	-Multiple training units should be separated by either a partition or a 1.5m distance effectively. -Each person in the same unit or group should keep 1.5m apart from each other in most of the time.			N/A
Mode of training	As usual	Avoid high-intensity training in either aerobic or resistance workout [Note 3]	Low-intensity and moderate-intensity training mainly	N/A
Mask-on requirement	No	Yes, except high-intensity training [Note3]	Yes; No exception	N/A
Measuring body temperature	Yes			N/A
Cleaning & disinfecting	Regular spray disinfection and effective anti-virus coating spray			N/A
Hand sanitizer	Must be provided in multiple locations			N/A
Ventilation and air cleaning	Maintain six cycles of ventilation per hour or install air cleaning / purifying machines (in line with the standard of catering premises prescribed by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department)			N/A
Staff COVID rapid testing	Yes (Once daily before service commencement)			N/A
Contact tracing	Yes			N/A
Vaccination	Follow the latest guideline applicable to scheduled premises			N/A
Shower facilities and towel provision	Provided	Limited provision (e.g. 1.5m distance between shower spaces)	Not provided	N/A
Steam & sauna	Suspended			N/A
Eating & drinking	No eating & drinking in workout areas.			N/A

Others	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No equipment sharing in group training; 2. Disinfecting equipment before and after training; 3. Disinfecting places and gears with bleach (1:49) or effective disinfectant multiple times a day; 4. Assign a stationed staff to perform as a designated hygiene officer responsible for the overall management of the above measures (applicable to all types of fitness centres, including the 24-hour gyms); 5. Mandatory closure should be imposed on gyms in which one or more cases of the COVID-19 are confirmed until deep cleaning and disinfection procedures are completed. 	N/A
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Note 1:

Normally, machine-based fitness centres can operate in their full capacities, i.e. 100% capacities, without the COVID-19 outbreak. **The full capacity can be calculated by dividing the usable area (sq. ft.) by 50 (sq. ft.).** Such standard makes reference to the guidelines prescribed by Sport England (2008)^[5], National Strength & Conditioning Association (2015)^[6] and American College of Sports Medicine (2018).^[7]

Note 2:

Normally, the minimum average floor area per capita for matwork and dance / other group training were **25 sq. ft. and 40 sq. ft.** respectively. Such standard makes reference to the guidelines prescribed by Sport England (2008)^[5] and American College of Sports Medicine (2018).^[7]

Note 3:

High intensity refers to exercising heart rate exceeding either **75% maximal heart rate (HR_{max})** or **60% heart rate reserve (HRR)**. Such standard makes reference to the guideline published by American College of Sports Medicine (2021).^[8]

It is high time the authorities considered lifting the restrictions to fitness centres, sports premises and recreational facilities, especially during the downturn in the fifth wave of the COVID-19 epidemic. The society need to strike a right balance among the risk of COVID-19, the economic decline of the industry and the impact of physical inactivity. Not only reopening indoor premises, but also outdoor sports venues need to be reopened as soon as possible. Physical Fitness Association of Hong Kong, China is ready to give professional advice on this issue as appropriate.

According to the figures announced by the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, more than 80% of the population had received the second dose of vaccine.^[9] Specialists of infectious diseases, public health experts, as well as the Government themselves foresee that more than 90% of people in Hong Kong will be fully vaccinated in the short-coming future. While everyone is looking forward to herd immunity for reducing the risk associated with community-acquired infection and related mortality, the society should also look out for all possible ways to ease the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic. It is evident that regular physical activity is one of the effective strategies to make the existing vaccination programme more potent.^[1] Reopening fitness centres, sports premises and recreational facilities in a stepwise approach can encourage the general public to be physically active.

References:

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