



COVID-19 INTERIM GUIDANCE FOR BHS ENSEMBLES AND SINGING COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

In light of the current public health emergency, we are all wondering when we might be able to safely sing together again. Just as we understand that voices united in song can make a positive and meaningful impact on ourselves and those around us, we should also recognize that we must work together to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Regardless of the various phased reopening plans that states, provinces, and communities have in place, **legal reopening or congregating is not equivalent to safely singing together in the same physical space.** It may be a while before it is safe for everyone to sing together. How long and in what ways are still to be determined. It is important to note that there is not a single solution that will work for everyone.

Please use your best judgment and follow all applicable national, provincial, state, and local laws, policies, and procedures when applying the information in this document to your unique situation. In general, this guidance is based on a collection of scientific research and other information from various and verified sources. We ourselves are not scientists or medical professionals - we are singers.

For the most up-to-date medical information and guidance, please visit the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html or the World Health Organization (WHO) website: www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus

BACKGROUND

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19, or Coronavirus Disease (SARS-CoV-2) is a respiratory illness caused by a virus that was identified in late 2019 and declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020. COVID-19 is an international, national, and local health emergency. Anyone can contract the disease, with older adults and those with serious underlying medical conditions potentially at a higher risk for more severe illnesses. There are many common sense measures that individuals should take to protect themselves and others such as wearing a face covering or mask while in public, maintaining social distance, washing hands frequently, avoiding touching your face with unwashed hands, avoiding close contact with people who are ill, covering your mouth when you cough or sneeze, and frequently disinfecting surfaces that are often touched.

What are the symptoms?

People with COVID-19 have presented a wide range of [symptoms](#) from mild to severe. Some instances occur with no symptoms at all, and the United States has reported over 520,000 deaths related to complications of the disease. Symptoms may appear 2-14 days after being exposed to the virus.

Who is at risk?

Anyone, regardless of age, may become infected. Certain underlying medical conditions or environmental factors may increase the risk of severe illness from COVID-19.

- People 65 years and older
- People who live in a nursing home or long-term care facility
- People of all ages with underlying medical conditions, particularly if not well controlled, including:
 - People with chronic lung disease or moderate to severe asthma
 - People who have serious heart conditions
 - People who are immunocompromised
 - Many conditions can cause a person to be immunocompromised, including cancer treatment, smoking, bone marrow or organ transplantation, immune deficiencies, poorly controlled HIV or AIDS, and prolonged use of corticosteroids and other immune weakening medications
 - People with severe obesity (body mass index [BMI] of 40 or higher)
 - People with diabetes, liver disease, or chronic kidney disease undergoing dialysis

How does the virus spread?

COVID-19 spreads very easily from person to person.

- Most commonly, the virus spreads between people who are in close contact of one another (within 6 feet).
- COVID-19 can be spread by people who are not showing symptoms.
- The virus also spreads through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, talks, or sings. Respiratory droplets may cause infection when they are inhaled or deposited on mucous membranes, such as those that line the inside of the nose and mouth.
- COVID-19 can sometimes be spread by airborne transmission. Evidence suggests that, under certain conditions, people with the virus have infected others who were more than six feet away. These transmissions occurred mostly within enclosed spaces that had inadequate ventilation.
- Reports suggest that surface transmission is possible, but is not a common way the virus spreads. This can be mitigated by frequent hand washing.

The virus that causes COVID-19 is spreading very easily and sustainably between people. Information from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic suggests that this virus is spreading more efficiently than influenza, but not as efficiently as measles, which is highly contagious. In general, the more closely a person interacts with others and the longer that interaction, the higher the risk of COVID-19 spread. For more information, please visit

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html>

How does this apply to singers?

Science suggests that the physical act of singing creates more aerosolized droplets than any other form of vocalizing. Aerosolized droplets can travel farther and remain in the air longer than droplets created by breathing or speaking. No existing barrier method or technique can be applied to singing that makes it safer in that regard. When singing with good breath support, small airways in the lungs close, then reopen during deep inhalation, releasing increased droplets to be emitted during singing. Deep breathing also facilitates airborne droplets entering deep into the lungs, rather than only into the nose and pharynx.

While these initial findings do not seem like the best outlook for singers, more studies are needed to gather data about how the virus spreads.

For more information, please visit <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7330568/>

THE CHORAL ECOSYSTEM RESPONSE

Science and the Near-Term Future of Singing

On May 5, 2020, a webinar addressing the future of singing was held in an effort to seek fact-based solutions in protecting singers, music educators, and conductors. It was a landmark collaboration, bringing together science, medicine, and arts management to provide clear-eyed, fact-based evaluation of the challenges we face.

Watch here: <https://www.barbershop.org/covid-webinar-summary>

Singing: What We CAN Do

On May 26, 2020, choral leaders gathered again for another webinar that offered examples of how singers and singing ensembles are producing their art now, as physical distancing guidelines continue to be in place. A variety of guests shared promising projects and existing and emerging technologies that keep us connected and singing.

Watch here: <https://www.barbershop.org/webinar-what-we-can-do>

Preliminary Study Results on the Safety of Singing

On August 10, 2020, choral leaders presented a joint webinar to discuss the ongoing research about aerosols and singing. This session focused on the preliminary release of results from scientific studies showing that singing and theatrical speaking can widely spread droplets which may contain viruses - and that masking, limited contact time, good ventilation, and air filtration are essential elements in reducing risk.

Watch here: <https://www.barbershop.org/singing-aerosol-study>

INTERNATIONAL COALITION OF PERFORMING ARTS AEROSOL STUDY

Several national and international performing arts education organizations are combining resources to study the effects of COVID-19 aerosol transmission in performing arts performance settings. The study is a massive undertaking that will require a focused effort from many organizations, including the Barbershop Harmony Society. This effort will be a duplicated study and will test how aerosols can spread from brass and woodwind instruments, the four vocal ranges, theatrical speech, and aerobic breathing. Together this collective group of organizations can create scientifically proven methods for our return to performing arts in a safe way with research showing us best practices and advocacy.

Visit the main study website here:

<https://www.nfhs.org/articles/unprecedented-international-coalition-led-by-performing-arts-organizations-to-commission-covid-19-study/>

The coalition was formed to study the effects of COVID-19 on the return to the rehearsal hall. It is important to understand what risks exist in performing arts classrooms and performance venues. Specifically, the study will examine aerosol rates produced by wind instrumentalists, vocalists, and actors, and how quickly those aerosol rates accumulate in a space. Although not yet proven, strong anecdotal evidence suggests that the COVID-19 virus can travel in the microscopic droplets expelled from a person with the virus, even when asymptomatic. The only way to determine what risk level exists or to create best practices for reducing infection risk is to understand how aerosol disbursement works in a performing arts setting.

Once the aerosol rates are better understood, the study will focus on remediation of aerosols in confined spaces like rehearsal rooms (both educational and professional), classrooms, and performance settings in order to develop better understanding, policy, and practice for a safe return to performance and education.

Dr. Shelly Miller at the University of Colorado will lead the scientific study and says, "Aerosol generating activities have the potential to transmit COVID as the research shows, but we have very little data on what kinds of generation happen when playing instruments. We will be studying this phenomenon (hopefully with funding) in our aerosol laboratory at the University of Colorado Boulder and with this data, will be able to provide better evidence-based guidance."

The study does not use a live virus or infected participants, and therefore cannot be used to determine specific infection rates. The study was designed to: identify performing arts activities that generate respiratory aerosols including volume, direction, and density; estimate the emission rates of respiratory aerosols; model the dispersion of aerosols; and investigate mitigation strategies.

CONSIDERATIONS

First, please understand that nothing is risk free. Circumstances and conditions vary by location, so be sure to follow any and all guidelines set forth by local, regional, state/provincial, and/or national governing agencies. Also bear in mind that most guidelines are not geared towards singers. Physical distancing of 6 feet should be maintained at a minimum, and increased whenever possible. Always exercise an abundance of caution. We are not suggesting that all ensembles should be rehearsing at this time. If you decide on your own to get together, develop a detailed plan of action and use your best judgement.

General Guidance for All Singing Communities

1. **Evaluate the Risks** - Many factors will affect your ensemble's decision to rehearse, so educate yourself with science and facts before you decide to get together. Some of the risks include: age, health status, underlying medical conditions, exposure to other individuals, local infection rates, and more.
2. **Be Flexible** - Depending on your situation, it may not be possible to gather for rehearsal immediately. If you do decide to get together, develop an action plan for your group and reevaluate as needed. As more details are learned about COVID-19, your action plan may change.
3. **Establish a Structured Check-in System** - Establish a checkpoint at the entrance of your gathering to help track individuals coming and going from your singing community. This can also help ensure every individual is following the safety protocols you have in place before they enter your rehearsal space.
4. **Be Responsible** - If you feel sick, stay home. If anyone in your immediate family is at higher risk, be overly cautious. If there's a chance you've been in close contact with someone who might be infected, self-isolate and monitor your own health closely.
5. **Screen Singers** - Consider screening participants for symptoms and performing no-touch temperature checks before gathering together.
6. **Maintain Social Distance** - Physical distancing of 6 feet or more is recommended. Avoid crowds and poorly ventilated spaces.
7. **Wear Masks** - Masks should be worn at all times. Singing may be more difficult, but a properly fitted mask will decrease the risk of droplet and aerosol spread. Singing with a mask produces less aerosols than sitting and breathing without a mask. Face shields are only effective at close range to stop large droplets; they do not prevent aerosol from being inhaled or released unless a mask is also worn.
8. **Sing Outdoors** - Continue enhanced physical distancing, stand in a straight line, and keep the wind at your back. A canopy tent with fully open sides can be used to protect singers from the elements.
9. **Shorten Rehearsals** - Singing together for a shorter amount of time will reduce the possibility of exposure. 30 minutes of singing followed by a 5-minute break to allow aerosols to disperse is a good rule of thumb.
10. **Practice Good Hygiene** - Routinely clean and disinfect surfaces that are touched often and wash your hands regularly. Hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol may be used if soap and water are not available. Don't share sheet music, folders, water bottles, pencils, or other personal items commonly associated with rehearsals. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
11. **Learning Tracks** - If in-person rehearsal is simply not possible, you can use [learning tracks](#) to introduce new music or polish existing repertoire while keeping singers engaged.
12. **Virtual Rehearsal** - Consider hosting [virtual rehearsals](#) and regular meetings to stay connected with your ensemble.
13. **Virtual Performance** - Consider creating and sharing a [virtual](#) performance of your ensemble.
14. **Get a COVID-19 Vaccine** - While supplies may be limited, vaccinations are currently taking place around the United States. You can find more information about [COVID-19 Vaccines](#) from the CDC. Guidance has also been updated for individuals that have been [fully vaccinated](#).

Singing indoors is not recommended - "Singing in a room for an extended period of time, in close contact with lots of people and no ventilation - that's a recipe for disaster." says Dr Shelly Miller. The transmission risk for singers in an enclosed space is extremely high when exposed to an infected individual.

Rehearsal space recommendations in order of preference:

- Outdoor rehearsals, using individual mitigation techniques described above.

- Indoors with elevated outdoor air exchange rate from HVAC.
- Indoors with typical outdoor air exchange rate from HVAC plus recirculation air through MERV 13 filters or addition of appropriately sized HEPA air cleaners.
- Indoors with outdoor air exchange rate from open windows supplemented with appropriately sized HEPA air cleaners when airflow is reduced under certain outdoor wind conditions.

Please refer to the Association for Heating, Ventilating and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) guidance on ventilation during COVID-19: <https://www.ashrae.org/technical-resources/resources>

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Quartet Guidance

1. **Form a “Quaranteam”** - Creating a [Social Bubble](#), or [Quarantine Pod](#), may be an option for your quartet. While it is not without risk, this may be a way to increase social interaction while limiting exposure and risk. How it works: A small group of people (quartet members and their families) choose to limit outside contact in order to interact with each other.
 - a. Everyone must agree to follow the rules your group sets for all social interactions and be completely open and honest about their actions. Individual behavior that doesn't follow the group rules can increase the risk for everyone involved. Discuss what will happen if the rules are broken or if someone is exposed. If anyone on your quaranteam starts to show symptoms, everyone should self-isolate for 14 days.
 - b. Decide how much risk is acceptable and develop protocols. While some individuals might be okay with in-home visits by family and friends outside the quartanteam, others are not. For example, some families wear masks for every interaction outside the home and others don't wear masks at all. Some families have decided to meet in larger groups for holidays or celebrations, and others do not. These are among the details you should discuss.
 - c. Maintain the agreed upon physical distancing rules outside your quaranteam, and be honest if you think you may have been exposed.
 - d. Communicate daily. We are learning more about the pandemic every day and your quaranteam should adjust with the changing realities.
 - e. Each person should consider getting tested to prevent asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic spread of the virus. This is a good first step when creating a new quaranteam.

Chorus Guidance

1. **Small Groups are Safer** - Any chorus, regardless of size, may be able to find different ways for members to gather together in smaller groups. Research suggests that small ensembles will be able to safely sing together much sooner than larger ensembles.
2. **Consider Sectionals or VLQs** - Depending on your local guidelines, it may not be possible or advisable for everyone to gather together at the same time. Remember to maintain enhanced physical distancing and sing outdoors.
3. **Take advantage of Virtual Chapter Visits** - Since April 2020, Harmony Hall Staffers have offered their time and diverse talents to over 200 chapters, reaching over 6000 BHS members. Some chapters team up with neighboring groups for these sessions while others are hosting virtual guest nights. Read more here: <https://www.barbershop.org/virtual-chapter-visits-fall-2020>
4. **Consider “Drive-In” Rehearsals** - Inspired by a Massachusetts choir, Somerset Hills Harmony is sharing their innovative solution to distance singing in a series of videos. Read more and watch here: <https://www.barbershop.org/the-drive-in-rehearsal-singing-safely-during-the-pandemic>
5. **Form “Quaranteam” Quartets** - Encouraging small groups to form quaranteams as outlined above may be an option for your chorus.

Insurance Considerations

Many have asked the question, "If and when we begin rehearsals and/or performances, what is our liability, and what does our insurance cover if a member or one of our patrons becomes infected with the COVID-19 virus."

- **Ultimately the answer to that question is a legal one that we (Harmony Hall) or our insurer cannot answer with any confidence.** As a practical matter, our insurance policies continue to provide appropriate general liability coverages for our singing communities but unfortunately, communicable disease coverage is no longer available on the Society policy and was eliminated by the Society's underwriter with our 2021 renewal. The changes to the Society's policies follow the industry trend started during the summer of 2020 where carriers refused to continue to cover risks associated with COVID-19 due to the unknown nature of the pandemic and risks associated with the virus. There are no exclusions for pandemics and communicable diseases. *The insurance industry is in turmoil around these issues, as liability and causation issues are causing risks to be re-evaluated.* As always, we recommend that all singing ensembles follow CDC guidelines together with local and state guidelines. Failure to follow CDC / governmental guidelines exposes a chapter to the increased risk of being found negligent and liable for the risks/injuries caused to individuals (members, guests, etc.). Establishing the legal element of "causation" for an individual contracting COVID-19 may be difficult to prove, particularly to pinpoint that causation to a specific chapter event or rehearsal. However, an organization does face increased risks if it does not take appropriate and reasonable measures to prevent the spread of the disease or implement appropriate policies and procedures. Ultimately the magnitude of that risk may be different depending upon local circumstances. For example, quartet/small group singing maintaining appropriate distancing outdoors and hygiene practices may pose minimal risk (though not zero), but a large gathering or travel to an event from different regions may violate local laws or regulations and may be dangerous to the health of participants knowing what we do about singers as "super-emitters."
- The risks inherent with the pandemic vary across the U.S. and Canada depending upon where you live. Nevertheless, experts continue to speak of the dangers of larger groups singing together and risks to audiences. Group singing has been identified by the CDC as a super-emitter with risks associated with the transmission of the disease based upon exposure to a contaminated individual. Harmony Hall continues to work closely with district leaders on the timing and review of all BHS events like District Conventions, Midwinter, and International. Harmony Hall continues to gather data and information to help chapters and singing communities navigate these challenging issues and create a new normal while we await vaccines to be more broadly distributed.
- Due to the evolving legal issues involving the virus and issues of causation and corporate liability, the risks of hosting events are largely centered around fact-based questions whether hosting such an event would be negligent or willful misconduct on the part of the organizing parties and that the event was the proximate cause of someone contracting the virus. These are legal causation questions and unfortunately are not easily answered. The challenge we have as an organization is whether the Society, districts, and chapters can confidently follow all local and state guidelines to minimize the risks to participants in our events. If someone is exposed, can we support the proposition that we exercised appropriate due care and should not be held directly liable for the potential exposure (i.e., are we taking temperatures, ensuring masks and distancing protocols, requesting participant waivers, etc.)? These are important risk questions to be considered.
- Harmony Hall staff together with district and chapter leaders continue to work on COVID-19 guidelines and recommendations to help safely bring our community back together for in-person events when appropriate.
- We remain focused on the health and safety of our members, guests, and audiences to ensure we are not being reckless in exposing our stakeholders to the risks associated with the pandemic. We want to be prudent and focus on the safety of our communities first and continue to recommend adhering to local authorities and CDC guidelines as it relates to gatherings.
- **A Note On Waivers:** The use/signage of a waiver does not necessarily absolve an organization of their duties of care (i.e., it may convey a false sense of security), but it also does place greater burden on the participant to acknowledge the risks they are voluntarily exposing themselves to. Important to note that while it is probably a good idea, a waiver is not a one-size-fits-all solution for allowing in-person rehearsals or performances to resume as usual.

RESOURCES

Health Information

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/>
 - [How to Protect Yourself and Others](#)
 - [Daily Life and Coping](#)
 - [Considerations for Events and Gatherings](#)
 - [Considerations for Community-Based Organizations](#)
 - [COVID-19 Vaccine Information](#)
 - [Frequently Asked Questions about COVID-19 Vaccination](#)
- World Health Organization (WHO) - <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>
- Government of Canada Resources - <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19.html>
- Coronavirus Resource Center - Johns Hopkins University & Medicine - <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/>

Quaranteam Information

- [A guide to negotiating a covid “bubble” with other people](#)
- [How to form a COVID-19 social ‘bubble’ or ‘quaranteam’](#)
- [How to form a COVID-19 social bubble](#)
- [The Dos and Don’ts of ‘Quarantine Pods’](#)

COVID-19 Airborne Transmission Estimator

- <https://tinyurl.com/covid-estimator>

Additional Resource Links

- COVID-19 Collected Resources and Articles - https://drive.google.com/drive/u/1/folders/1PZ8RF3EytzUWGwfjNpu4fsyXc4E_u2Yi
- Georgia Tech Event Risk Assessment Planning Tool - <https://covid19risk.biosci.gatech.edu/>
- Know Your Own Tolerance for Risk - <https://testyourself.psychtests.com/testid/2122>
- Aerosol Study FAQs - <https://www.nfhs.org/articles/aerosol-study-faq-s-blog/>
- Cloth Mask Performance and Testing - <http://jv.colostate.edu/masktesting/>
- [DRAFT] COVID-19 Release Form - <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1KZT9w0Chjz3f4BDrUIPvZaqa2xdstxnKsZt8jPbCzpQ/edit?usp=sharing>

Version History

- V0.9 *June 2020* Pre-release Draft; refocus from choral organization to BHS-specific guidance
- V1.0 *Aug 2020* First public release; deaths attributed to COVID-19; additional virus spread detail; Preliminary Study results added; General Guidance update; RESOURCES update; minor format updates
- V1.1 *Sep 2020* Format and language updates; deaths attributed to COVID-19; Aerosol Study results
- V1.2 *Oct 2020* Deaths attributed to COVID-19; CDC airborne transmission language; Virtual Chapter Visits; Drive-In Rehearsal info
- V1.3 *Feb/Mar 2021* Deaths attributed to COVID-19; General Guidance updates; rehearsal space recommendations; CDC language and terminology updates; insurance considerations update; Vaccine references and links; DRAFT Release Form link; Version History added