**UTEP Plan for Resuming Research Operations**

**June 2020**

***NOTE: These Guidelines relate specifically to research activities. These are in addition to and DO NOT supersede any procedures implemented by The University of Texas at El Paso or The University of Texas System for the phased return of personnel, including those in high risk categories.***

**The paramount principle of resuming research operations is the health and safety of our communities, especially of vulnerable individuals.** As outlined by university, local, state and federal officials, UTEP taking a phased approach to reopening. Increasing the level of research beyond essential activity depends on training of all participants and development by PIs of a specific Work/Safety plan that must be reviewed and approved by their respective Director, Chair, or Dean. Such plans should be submitted through the [Work/Safety Plan Submission Form.](https://forms.utep.edu/form.aspx?pid=303bd7c4-e334-4570-af66-867e2a2fad48&formid=04eb17a4-0b79-4801-b45b-2fd9b7fe7996)

The goal of this communication is to provide guidance to researchers who will be expected to create specific Work/Safety plans for their activities and personnel. Additional updates, resources and FAQs will be posted at <https://www.utep.edu/orsp/news-and-events/announcements/covid19-and-utep-research.html>. **Please be aware that if there is a significant increase in infections, it may be necessary to return quickly to essential research activities only, or even to more restricted operations.**

As research activities are restarting, preventative measures against COVID-19 spread will remain essential. These include:

* Maintaining 6 feet distancing at all times.
* Maintaining good personal hygiene, including proper hand washing or hand sanitizing, cough/sneeze etiquette, and avoidance of touching your face, eyes, nose and mouth.
* Using appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), including cloth masks plus any additional PPE that is necessary based on proposed research, to protect oneself and others from the spread of the virus while within the labs as well as within the research building.
* Cleaning/disinfecting high-touch locations in shared spaces, including laboratories.
* Self-screening before coming to campus for new or worsening signs or symptoms of possible COVID-19. **Do not come to work if ill or exhibiting signs or symptoms of COVID-19.**

Before commencing any new projects, researchers should:

Ensure access to an adequate and reliable supply of appropriate PPE, including any that may already be required by IACUC or biosafety protocols.

Recalibrate or seek recertification of any major equipment before resumption of use to ensure functionality and safety of the equipment.

Secure access to all necessary research supplies and materials, including ordering, shipping, receiving, and delivery to normal building delivery locations.

Procure access to supplies of research animals, including necessary animal care activities.

Prepare all participants to complete all required training and assurances of compliance in COVID-19 safety procedures.

Note that the expansion of research activities beyond the present level must also be coordinated with the presence of support staff on campus necessary to support research operations, including ordering, receiving, and delivery services and any core facilities whose service may be required. ***In particular,* access to and protocols for use of shared resources such as libraries, computing facilities, and core facilities will be determined by the management of each facility.**

**Mandatory hygiene procedures for all research locations/personnel:**

Wearing face coverings (i.e., use of a material to cover the nose and mouth) in all shared spaces, including laboratories.

Cleaning all “high touch” surfaces, including door and cabinet handles, bench surfaces, keyboards, instrument control panels, at the beginning and end of the day. All shared equipment, including computer keyboards and tables should have user interface surfaces cleaned between every user.

Disinfecting other “high touch” items such as hand tools, micro-pipettors, faucet handles, chemical and spray bottles, chair backs and arm rests, pens, and whiteboard markers between users.

* Using an EPA-approved disinfectant that is effective against COVID-19 in addition to the other biohazardous agents that may be in use. A list can be found at <https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2> If an EPA-approved disinfectant is unavailable, a 1/3 cup to 1 gal solution of bleach in water will adequately disinfect surfaces.
* Paying attention to disinfectant contact times; most disinfectants do not work immediately, but require specific contact times.
* Using appropriate PPE when using disinfectants/cleaning, including eye protection and chemical compatible impervious gloves.

***Under no circumstances should anyone come to work when ill or exhibiting any known symptoms of COVID-19. Individual units may implement screening procedures, including measurement of individuals’ temperatures or other wellness checks as they see fit. Instructions for responding to confirmed or suspected cases of Covid-19 may be found at*** <https://www.utep.edu/ehs/COVID-19/index.html>

***Any individual who feels that they are being asked to carry out unsafe activities or to work under conditions that are unsafe for themselves and others should discuss their concerns with their immediate supervisor or, if necessary and appropriate, with their unit head or the Office of Human Resources.***

**For laboratory-based research**, lab occupancy should be limited to those individuals necessary to conduct the research. The number of researchers must be kept sufficiently small to allow all participants to maintain at least six feet of physical separation while moving around the laboratory. In addition, no more than one person at a time should be working in a limited space such as a hood, glove box, safety cabinet, or small room. This may require reducing laboratory occupancy by:

* Continuing remote work to the extent possible for activities such as literature review, data analysis, and writing.
* Establishing rotating shifts for lab members.
* Establishing one-way flow through doorways, stairwells, etc. If possible, designate and label an entrance and an exit door for each laboratory.
* Posting schedules for the use of each laboratory space and/or piece of shared equipment, including names and contact information for all users. This includes facilities that are shared by multiple research groups. Sign-in sheets are recommended for any space or instrument with four or more users, and for any small research rooms accommodating only 1 person.

**PIs are responsible for developing and implementing appropriate work and safety plans for their laboratories and for training their personnel on appropriate cleaning and disinfecting, hand hygiene, and respiratory etiquette.** These plans should address the specific recommendations of each of the graduated response levels defined by the university. For research not involving human subjects, these plans must be submitted to and approved by the appropriate unit head (department head or director). Colleges may require review and approval of these plans. They may also implement access control and screening procedures for buildings and spaces within them under their control.

**Researchers with approved protocols requiring specialized PPE or protocols** should continue to wear the appropriate PPE and observe the appropriate protocols for that research in addition to any COVID specific precautions. Any deviations from approved protocols must have prior approval by the cognizant body (IACUC, IRB, IBC, etc.).

**All researchers should be cognizant of the fact that the infection and spread of COVID-19 in any facility on campus will likely require a return to essential activities only, or even greater restrictions, depending on location and circumstances.** Therefore, orders for “perishable” materials, including animals or short-lived isotopes, should be restricted to meeting the immediate needs of the research being conducted. Those who have frozen biological specimens should also consider the possible need to refreeze samples if it becomes necessary to reduce research activities again.

At present, UTEP travel restrictions remain in effect. Field activities for essential activities such as seasonal research have been permitted on a case-by-case basis as essential activities in low population density areas, with the requirement that social distancing is actively practiced, including no more than one person per vehicle when traveling or working at the field site. Requests for such travel should be forwarded through your appropriate director to chair and dean. Travel authorizations may be expanded to activities that are not seasonal or time dependent, provided that interaction with members of the public is minimized and social distancing is maintained at the work site and when traveling to and from field sites. **These requirements are in addition to and do not replace existing travel approvals required for faculty, staff, and students.**

**Research involving human subjects or contact with the public will be subject to additional review in order to limit the exposure of UTEP researchers and members of the external community** during the course of research activities. Guidelines for such research projects may be found in the document “Human Subjects Research Operations Guidance” at .