

July 30, 2020

Precautions Regarding the Resumption of Extracurricular Activities

I would like to thank all students for your patience and cooperation with regard to the measures that the University of Tokyo has taken in response to the novel coronavirus infections (COVID-19). As of August 6, the restrictions on the use of Komaba Campus facilities for club and other extracurricular activities are being relaxed. Today, I would like convey to you some important guidelines regarding this resumption of extracurricular activities.

We are now in the second wave of COVID-19 infections. According to news reports, clusters of infections have appeared at several other universities that resumed extracurricular activities, and those universities were forced to restrict activities again. Our resumption of extracurricular activities therefore entails significant risks. I suspect that there is a high possibility of clusters forming at Komaba due to student activities, and it would be close to miraculous if they are able to continue without any problems.

For this reason, I ask all students to be fully aware of the challenges you will face as you resume extracurricular activities. Please always keep in mind the grave impact that the formation of a cluster of infections would have, not only on yourselves but also on your friends and families. Please exercise great self-restraint when you take part in any such activities. (The formation of large clusters at UTokyo would impact our current preparations to resume in-person classes during the A Semester. Our faculty and staff are now working hard to enable first-year students in particular to experience face-to-face classes. Please do not make our efforts in vain.)

How can you prevent the formation of infection clusters? Case studies on the spread of COVID-19 have started to reveal the conditions under which clusters form most easily. The novel coronavirus spreads from person to person basically through droplets of saliva, nasal mucus, and other bodily secretions. While the virus has a simple structure and can be deactivated relatively easily with disinfectants such as alcohol or with soap or other surfactants, if left alone on smooth surfaces it remains active for several days. Clusters of infections therefore form most easily under situations like the following, that is, the “three Cs” (closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings):

1. Many people not wearing masks talking and spraying their saliva around
2. People in close physical contact with each other

3. Multiple people handling the same unsterilized objects
4. Active people (including, unfortunately, those who are asymptomatic) who come into contact with many others over extended periods of time
5. People gathering in poorly ventilated, unsterilized environments
6. People who became infected in one of the above environments and, upon returning home, spread the infection unawares to people of other generations

As you can see, it would be impossible to avoid the formation of clusters if you just went about your club and other extracurricular activities as normal. Although we have relaxed the restrictions, you must not behave as you have in the past. UTokyo students are faced with a severe test: How long can you go about your activities while avoiding the three Cs and preventing the formation of clusters? While the faculty and staff can help to prevent infections to some extent, extracurricular activities are fundamentally carried out by students, and it is up to you to pass this test.

I understand that it might be hard for you to know what to do. In my own field of research, we often handle microorganisms and animal cells in an aseptic environment. We have to learn how to maintain sterility by sterilizing the laboratory environment and equipment, by washing and sterilizing our hands and fingers, by not talking while working in the lab, etc. It is difficult at first, but almost anybody can learn how to do it with practice. While you don't need to be that careful in your extracurricular activities, you can reduce the possibility of infections by always being conscious that invisible viruses might be present anywhere.

Infections can also occur off campus, of course. If students relaxing after sports or other club activities on campus let their guard down and go out together to eat, it would be easy for infections to spread. Many people commute to Komaba by riding on crowded trains and passing through crowded areas like Shibuya. If you do have to travel by train, please avoid the busiest times, avoid talking while on the train, and wash your hands as soon as possible after touching straps or handrails.

If you do become infected with the virus, please treat it as an accident and don't blame the person you might have caught it from. Also, don't try to hide the fact that you are infected; rather, make sure that you do not spread it any further. To prepare for the possibility of infection, please start keeping a record of your activities and install on your smartphone the COCOA contact-confirming app issued by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. If you do get infected or become ill, report the details as soon as possible through university's Health Management Report Form (<https://www.u-tokyo.ac.jp/ja/general/healthcheck.html>).

I doubt if any university anywhere in the world is able to allow their students to go ahead with their usual activities during this COVID-19 pandemic. As you take part in extracurricular activities, please remember that you are treading on complete new territory. COVID-19 threatens the in-person interaction and real-world network-building that we all treasure and want to preserve. I ask all UTokyo students to help to develop a new model for how we can move forward. Please understand, though, that, depending on the infection situation in Tokyo and nationwide, we might have to restrict extracurricular activities again. In the meantime, I sincerely hope that you can all enjoy this important period in your life without further restrictions for as long as possible.

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