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STATE HEALTH OFFICER

TO: All Institutions of Higher Education

FROM: Scott Harris, M.D., M.P.H.   
State Health Officer

DATE: March 3, 2020

SUBJECT: SARS-CoV-2 (previously 2019 Coronavirus) Guidance for Returning Students and Staff

The 2019 novel coronavirus is a virus that causes a potentially severe respiratory disease, COVID-19. Initially identified in China, SARS-CoV-2 has been detected worldwide and within the United States. The situation regarding COVID-19 continues to evolve rapidly. The Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) is asking that all universities and colleges implement their plans to mitigate and control the spread of disease on their campuses. ADPH is providing education on the current guidance and asking for compliance with the recommendations provided. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recommended Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) consider postponing or cancelling upcoming student foreign exchange programs, and that IHEs consider asking current program participants to return to their home country ([www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/student-foreign-travel.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/student-foreign-travel.html)). IHEs are asked to have their own plans and these can be more restrictive but should not be less restrictive than CDC's guidance. Guidance is subject to change, so it is important to have an assigned person checking for updates daily.

Students and staff returning from Level 3 or Level 2 countries with active community transmission ([www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html)) may have been exposed to COVID-19 and ADPH recommends students and staff self-monitor for 14 days after leaving the affected area. Students and staff should notify their student health programs, if applicable, to let them know that they are self-monitoring. ADPH will be providing materials with specific instructions on self-monitoring and practicing social distancing to IHEs and upon request to students, parents, and other returning travelers. Information with instructions on self-monitoring is available for download at [www.alabamapublichealth.gov/infectiousdiseases/assets/cdc-care-booklet.pdf](http://www.alabamapublichealth.gov/infectiousdiseases/assets/cdc-care-booklet.pdf).

IHEs should follow CDC guidance. The ADPH Infectious Diseases & Outbreaks Division can be reached at (334) 206-5347 to answer general questions. In addition, citizens can call 211 for answers to common questions beginning on or after March 3, 2020.

Follow CDC's recommendations for using a facemask. It is not recommended that people who are well wear a facemask to protect themselves from respiratory diseases, including COVID-19. Facemasks, including surgical masks, should be used by people who show symptoms of COVID-19 ([www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/prevention-treatment.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/prevention-treatment.html)). Health care providers have specific guidance on the use of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and should follow this guidance. If sick with respiratory illness, in addition to contacting your physician before going in, put a mask on if you have access to one. This is a general recommendation to reduce the spread of respiratory illnesses since we also have widespread influenza circulating in Alabama.

Students and staff members who returned from an affected area who develop symptoms compatible with COVID-19 such as fever, cough, or difficulty breathing within their 14-day self-monitoring period should take the following steps:

- Separate themselves from others, and if they have a mask, put it on. Immediately notify student health, if applicable, and contact the ADPH Infectious Diseases & Outbreaks Division at 1-800-338-8374. This number can be reached 24/7/365. *(As a result of the volume of calls, this number should only be used by persons doing self-monitoring and physicians, and is not for use by the general public).* ADPH can assist in coordination for evaluation.
- If they experience an urgent health situation, they are asked to seek medical care right away and inform emergency medical services that they are self-monitoring for COVID-19, or they should call their physician before going to a doctor's office or emergency room. Always call ahead and tell them about recent travel and symptoms. This will limit transmission to others.
- If possible, restrict travel to private vehicle or medical transport (e.g., ambulance). Do not use public transportation while sick.
- Persons who become symptomatic will require written physician clearance to return to school.

Additional guidance from CDC on returning students is available at [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/student-foreign-travel.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/student-foreign-travel.html).

The best way to prevent illness is to limit exposure to potentially ill persons. All students and staff should use "respiratory etiquette" and practice the following preventative actions:

1. Cover cough with a tissue or sleeve. See the CDC "Cover Your Cough" webpage ([www.cdc.gov/flu/prevent/actions-prevent-flu.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/prevent/actions-prevent-flu.htm)).
2. Provide adequate supplies within easy reach, including tissues and no-touch trash cans.
3. Routinely clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces and objects.
4. Separate sick students and staff from others until they can go home. If masks are available, mask the person who is ill.

5. Encourage flu vaccine for those who have not received it this season to reduce illnesses and absences on campus. While this will not prevent coronavirus illnesses, it can help conserve scarce resources needed to respond to COVID-19.
6. Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available.
7. Avoid touching face with unwashed hands.
8. Avoid close contact with people who are sick.

For additional information, please contact ADPH at (334) 206-5347 or visit the ADPH website at <http://alabamapublichealth.gov/infectiousdiseases/2019-coronavirus.html>.

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