

Department of Veterans Affairs

Memorandum

Date: May 26, 2020

From: Chief Veterinary Medical Officer, Office of Research and Development (10X2)

Subj: Resumption of Normal Animal Facility Operations

To: Associate Chiefs of Staff for Research and Development (ACOS/R&D)

1. On behalf of Dr. Ramoni, Chief Research and Development Officer, and the entire ORD COVID-19 response team, I am distributing this memo to provide some guidelines to use in local decisions on when and how to move toward more normal research support operations in VA animal facilities. The goal is to balance increasing scientific activities within animal facilities with continued protection of animal facility staff so that animal care is not unduly compromised. The information in this memo and attached algorithm is intended to help local programs develop a strategy for resuming animal facility, but is not intended to limit local decisions based upon local conditions.

2. The impact of the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic has varied among medical centers, and the degree of animal facility operation curtailment has varied. Accordingly, the timing and measures needed to allow work on research studies to gradually increase in the facility and get back to full support operations will also vary. In addition, decisions to ramp up activity within the animal facility might have to be revisited given the uncertainty of how infection rates will respond to loosening of business restrictions in different states.

3. When considering the impact of different activities on the risk of spreading virus from an asymptomatic infected person in the animal facility to another person, some practices will involve more risk than others, and some practices can reduce risk if implemented. One way to think about the risk impact on scientific and husbandry activities in the animal facility is presented in the table below:

Description of Activity or Practice	Social Distancing Impact	People Density Impact	Separation of animal care and research teams
Studies in facility that can be completed by a single research technician with no assistance from animal care staff	Lower Risk (only one tech present in room during procedure)	Depends on other policies	Lower Risk (animal care staff not involved)

Studies in facility such as surgery that require a team of research staff to complete, with or without participation by animal care staff.	Higher Risk (people must be in closer contact for extended periods)	Higher Risk (more people together)	Higher Risk if animal care staff must be present
Staggering animal caretaker schedules to limit number of personnel present at one time.	Lower Risk (fewer person to person interactions)	Lower Risk (fewer animal care staff present at a time)	Depends on other policies
Limiting facility access to animal care staff in mornings so that husbandry duties are completed in rooms without research staff present.	Lower Risk (fewer person to person interactions)	Lower Risk (no research staff present at some times and animal care staff do not need to be in rooms with research staff as often)	Lower Risk (temporal separation of animal care and research staff members)
Limiting number of research staff members that can be present in the animal facility at one time or limiting the number based upon facility area.	Lower Risk (fewer person to person interactions)	Lower Risk (fewer people present at one time)	Depends on other policies
Restricting access to animal care rooms to an animal care staff member or a research staff member, but not both at the same time.	Lower Risk (fewer person to person interactions)	Lower Risk (fewer people present at one time)	Lower Risk (separation of animal care and research staff)

4. Here are some key factors that can be helpful in deciding when activity restrictions in the animal facility can be progressively lifted:

- The efficacy and availability of PPE for research staff and participants. Although not mandated, we are recommending staff wear N-95 masks when in the animal facility. This is particularly important for animal care staff. We understand this specialized PPE might be in short supply, with first priority being clinical staff. If that is the case at your facility, standard procedure masks are acceptable.
- The efficacy and feasibility of meeting special distancing requirements.

- The availability of animal facility or EMS personnel to regularly disinfect shared equipment or fixtures.
- When the local VA Medical Center resumes in-person patient visits for elective conditions.
- When and how the university affiliate allows researchers and staff to resume research activities.
- When city or state 'shelter-in-place' orders for nonessential businesses have are lifted.
- The availability of testing for symptomatic or asymptomatic personnel through occupational health with contact tracing.

5. ORD strongly encourages each facility to involve the IACUC and SRS in the development of any plans to resume full animal facility operations with full support for animal studies, and to document their review and approval.

6. Measures to limit interpersonal interactions, increase social distancing, and the availability and use of personal protective equipment (PPE) are critical factors in operations resumption plans. Social distancing should also be practiced in offices, breakrooms, etc. Thorough and frequent hand washing plus regular disinfection of commonly touched surfaces are also effective preventative measures.

a. Local animal facilities have shared a number of ideas for limiting animal care and research staff exposure to the virus in animal facilities, by reducing the number of personnel in close proximity and present at the time in the facility:

- Animal care shifts can be staggered to reduce the number of staff members present at the same time and increase.
- Specific times each day can be set aside exclusively for animal care activities to reduce the interactions between animal care and research personnel.
- Flip signs can be placed on animal holding room entrance doors to notify researchers when animal care activities are underway, and to not enter until the animal care staff member leaves.
- The number of research staff per lab or a cap on the number of total research staff members can be instituted.
- The number of total personnel allowed in a large animal room can be based upon the area of a room to reduce the frequency of interactions and increase social distancing.

b. Use of appropriate PPE can also reduce the risk of transmission between individuals in the animal facility. Continued shortages of PPE can strongly influence the timing of a resumption plan:

- All research staff should preferentially have N-95 masks for use when in the animal facility; this is particularly important for animal care staff when procedures such as surgery are being performed that prevent effective

social distancing, additional PPE such as a face shield should be considered.

- Disposable gloves are effective at reducing skin contamination.
- Training in proper donning, use, and disposal of all PPE used should be provided to all personnel.
- Re-sterilization or sanitization practices for re-using PPE should be communicated widely to personnel to reduce PPE waste.
- Any additional hospital PPE expectations should be incorporated into the resumption plan.

7. The attached algorithm may be helpful in developing the resumption plan based upon minimizing risk factors. For instance, the size of an animal facility might significantly impact a resumption plan because programs with few approved protocols might be able to very effectively limit interactions between research and animal care staff.

8. Notification to ORD. Once the facility research program obtains local concurrence on its animal facility operations resumption plan, the research office needs to notify the Chief Veterinary Medical Officer's office that it is proceeding with the plan in an email to Dr. Alice Huang (alice.huang@va.gov). Any questions about this guidance should be sent to Dr. Alice Huang or Dr. Michael Fallon (contact information below).

9. Additional information in the form of a FAQ is available on the VA animal research home page under the heading "COVID-19 and VA Animal Care and Use Programs" at https://www.research.va.gov/programs/animal_research/animal-care-FAQ-COV-19.docx. This memo will also be available there.



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