

T&RA Risk Assessment

The information below is based on the T&RA's understanding of the available guidance on COVID-19. Clubs and players will need to make their own risk assessments. Nobody who either has, is suspected of having, the infection, or is either vulnerable or shielding should arrive at a court. Personal hygiene is assumed (hand washing and social distancing). The T&RA will provide updates as and when any new information is available.

Introduction

This risk assessment is a higher-level process and must be supplemented with an individual Club/School court risk assessment to determine the local effects based on the court and building characteristics.

The risks to be considered under this higher-level assessment are twofold: (i) arrival and departure from the court and (ii) on-court risks.

The travel to and from the court is straightforward to assess and mitigate against, as this can mostly be covered under the current LTA guidelines for outdoor tennis. All players should arrive changed, practice enhanced hygiene by washing hands, timing your arrival at court to minimise contact time with the previous players, proceed directly to court (with social distancing), bring your own water and towel. After the game follow the reverse procedure, do not write up the score, depart promptly after washing hands, no showers or using any club facilities, remove kit and wash upon arrival home, etc. These basics can be enhanced or simplified.

On-court risks need more attention, especially as some will be unique to Tennis and Rackets. The contamination can be direct touch (surfaces and balls primarily) or indirect aerosol (from being in an enclosed space). The majority of the considerations are on these points. The consensus of the experts is that the greater risk is airborne, and this is the more difficult to mitigate against.

Reopening Facilities after Period of Closure

Clubs should consider measures to minimise the health and safety risks deriving from having been closed for a significant period of time.

These may commonly include checks on water supplies (e.g. checking tanks for legionella and also checking manual water dispensers), fire safety equipment and first aid equipment.

Contamination

The available information indicates that the virus travels from person to person via a variety of methods but can be broadly split into direct transmission and fomite transmission, via inanimate surfaces. When a person exhales, particles are released into the atmosphere which can be in the form of large droplets, with a short-range dispersal, or very fine particles, which travel further and evaporate. With an infected person, droplets will contain millions of viral particles which will form a film on anything within the short range, while the finer particles will evaporate and leave the viral particle airborne in the form of an aerosol, albeit of lower concentration.

The type of exhalation will affect the distribution of contamination. A person exercising will breathe more deeply and force more particles into the atmosphere. This process is exacerbated with either coughing or sneezing.

If we assume social distancing then direct human to human transmission via touch is covered. However, the fomite transmission still needs to be addressed which includes not touching any surfaces or walls where the larger droplets may have collected, including where hands may have acted as a vector. An enhanced hygiene regime including careful hand washing before entering and after departing the court will assist, together with a regular cleaning routine for surfaces (in Tennis to include the Dedans, gallery and grille); in both sports the floor and the walls at least daily.

The available evidence suggests that transmission via the balls is likely to be low, but cannot be totally ignored. Sensible measures such as wearing a clean glove (such as a golf glove) on the non-playing hand will help, although the glove will generally become contaminated over the course of the period on court. Face protection is also important, especially to mitigate against any other form of injury and eye protection involving a quality polycarbonate lens is recommended. The use of a non-surgical face mask could also be considered, which would limit the spread of droplets, further reducing the possibility of fomite transmission.

Evidence suggest that the aerosol issue is not one which will simply go away, so there will be a future risk when playing in an enclosed space. Outdoor sport (and being outdoors generally) is a safer option than being in an enclosed space. However, infection needs to cross a threshold and even high-quality face masks such as medical grade N-95 are only guaranteed to stop 95% of viral particles. Some viral particles will be inhaled, even outdoors, but the body can usually deal with tiny doses; the risk becomes significant when the immune system is overloaded. Hence the more virus particles which you inhale, the higher the risk. The nature of the larger courts will decrease this risk compared with a small cramped space, but not entirely.

In all the above, the player would be at variable risk, but the professionals would always be at enhanced risk as they are at the court for considerably longer. Measures should be considered to mitigate against this enhanced risk, magnified by length of exposure.

Confidence and risk management

This risk is lowered by reference to the COVID-alert state and the possible future existence of a vaccine or treatments. At some point there will be a cross over with the healthier, younger players willing to manage this risk so as to start playing. Players need to have a personal responsibility to self-certify themselves as fit. If they are isolating for any reason they do not go near the court. The Track and Trace may provide additional confidence, depending on its widespread utility and effectiveness.

Way forward

Importantly, nothing can happen until there is further relaxation by the government but we are heading in that direction. While the infection rate (R_0) may yet thwart progress, the T&RA is preparing guidance for clubs and players.

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