
UT Extension COVID-19 Re-Opening Plan

Updated July 2, 2020

This plan provides guidance regarding UT Extension re-opening county offices throughout the state. This plan will be followed until further notice. The progression or regression through phases of returning to work will depend on the numbers of COVID-19 cases that are active in our various counties throughout the state.

This plan is presented in phases. It is assumed that counties will reopen and progress through the phases at different times. Reopening is heavily dependent upon daily monitoring of new COVID-19 cases in each county. Some counties will need to monitor cases in surrounding counties also, if residents typically travel to adjoining counties for work, shopping, etc.

The Tennessee Department of Health releases new case counts daily at 3:00 PM Eastern/2:00 PM Central at <https://www.tn.gov/health/cedep/ncov.html>.

County specific case counts can be monitored at: <https://myutk.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/a4614b1566f44f559d9c5995ebe9c49d>

Lifting of stay-at-home orders and expected relaxing of social distancing practices among the public may increase spread of coronavirus in coming weeks/months. Increased availability of COVID-19 testing will likely increase number of reported cases. Counties with increasing cases may expect to remain in Phase 0 for a number of weeks. Counties experiencing a surge in cases after moving to Phases 1-3 may need to revert back to Phase 0 until consistent decreases in new cases are reported.

It is important to acknowledge differing county Extension office situations. Some offices exist in free-standing buildings with a dedicated entrance/exit just for Extension employees and patrons. Others may be located in shared spaces, government buildings or courthouses with shared entrances, common areas (hallways, kitchen or breakroom space, etc.), and public restrooms, impacting access to handwashing facilities. These factors may increase risk of exposure for employees in some offices. This should be considered before advancing through phases of re-opening.

It is also important to recognize the culture of local Extension offices and interaction with clientele may make enforcing social distancing difficult. Extension is the friendly “front porch” or “front door” to the university in communities. Existing clientele may be accustomed to drop-in chats that can easily converge into a “gathering” if others drop by at the same time. Clear communication about re-opening plans and expected social distancing practices upon opening offices to the public should be planned. This is also important in light of conflicting recommendations from the state, university, or county government.

Extension offices should err on the side of caution and follow the most cautious guidelines when recommendations conflict.

In all phases:

- ***County offices should be ready to adjust based on changes to CDC, state and local government and health officials' guidance. Decisions for changes in staffing will be made in conjunction with county officials and regional directors. Data reported for each county should be considered when moving forward or backward between phases.***
- County offices should daily monitor COVID-19 case counts for the county and surrounding counties/nearby metropolitan areas, and adjust operations accordingly. Again, county specific data can be found at: <https://myutk.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/a4614b1566f44f559d9c5995e9c49d>
- Protect employees at higher risk by allowing opportunities for remote work. This includes those who are at higher risk themselves, and those who are caring for or live with someone that is a member of a vulnerable population.
- Be compassionate and flexible. Work with employees who have childcare or other family responsibilities and be mindful of the anxiety felt by employees.

Constant self-check-ins for symptoms: Employees should perform self-checks for a fever and symptoms associated with COVID-19 every day prior to arriving for work. **Please use the COVID-19 Checklist provided at the end of this plan as guidance.** Any employees/students with COVID-19 symptoms should not come into work and should report any concerns to primary care physician, their supervisor, and seek COVID-19 testing.

Please note that the average normal temperature for a person is 98.6°F (37°C) and the recommended temperature to indicate a fever is 100.4°F (38°C). However, individuals may vary slightly in their normal temperature (either slightly higher or lower) and you should determine what your normal is. An increase in 2°F (1°C) would indicate a significant increase in temperature. Similarly, if using a no-touch thermometer, you should determine your normal surface temperature and monitor for increases similar to with an oral thermometer.

Increased personal hygiene precautions both at home and at work: Employees are encouraged to maintain the same high level of hygiene currently being practiced until further notice both at work and home. Some recommendations below are unlikely to occur in the short term but should be considered to improve hygiene in offices across the state as we move past the current pandemic.

- Promote and practice healthy hygiene practices. Have adequate supplies to support healthy hygiene behaviors, including soap, and hand sanitizer.
- Hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol should be provided in all office spaces.
- Proper hand hygiene is preferred, and encouraged, over wearing disposable gloves in Extension office settings.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.
- Post signage on how to stop the spread of coronavirus.
- All bathrooms should be upgraded to contactless soap dispensers, paper towels, water faucets, if possible. If not possible, make sure that paper towels are available to use to open doors.
- People should be able to pass through as many doors as possible without the use of hands. The placement of paper towels in bathrooms can aid when exiting bathrooms.

Maintain Social Distancing:

- Allocation of employees into office spaces should be done in a manner that promotes social distancing.
- Clearly mark spaces (tape, signage, furniture rearrangement, etc.) indicating 6-foot space between persons in the office (for clientele upon approaching reception area, etc.). Some counties may expect installation of plexi-glass barriers.
- Space desks/work areas at least six feet apart.
- Limit use of shared spaces or items.
- Communicate social distancing measures and expectations to Extension clientele.
- Employees should wear masks when interacting with other employees or members of the public. Cloth masks that are laundered in hot water at least daily are recommended.
- Ensure ventilation systems operate properly. Increase circulation of outdoor air as much as possible by opening windows and doors, using fans, or other methods. Do not open windows and doors if they pose safety or health risk (e.g., allowing pollen in or exacerbating asthma symptoms). NOTE: This comes from draft CDC guidance soon to be released: <https://context-cdn.washingtonpost.com/notes/prod/default/documents/5c0a7b41-2997-4a9a-ad3a-7d2ff788fc8e/note/8c6cbafb-bc04-4d78-9f15-cf27fc7c4b4d.#page=1>

Face coverings and personal protective equipment (PPE): Employees are required to wear facemasks, as appropriate, when social distancing (greater than 6' spacing) is not possible. Cloth masks should be laundered in hot water daily as recommended. Proper hand hygiene is preferred, and encouraged, over wearing disposable gloves in non-clinical/non-research settings.

Phased approach

We must consider the county policy on returning to work. If any county is not comfortable reopening offices, we should continue to work from home. Also, UT Extension will work with counties to ensure that reopening requirements are being met such as installing physical barriers to reception areas, gloves, masks and/or any other requirements from the county government. Each county would be unique in these requirements.

Phase 0 – This is our current status; all employees who can work remotely are doing so. County Extension offices are closed.

Counties with low or stable case counts for at least 14 days may opt to enter Phase 1.

Alternative Phase – Employees working remotely may return to the office regardless of new and or active COVID-19 cases. Counties with larger staff may consider continuing to limit the number of employees in the office at one time. Extension office is open to the public by appointment only. Staffing will be based on need determined by the county director in consultation with the regional director. There will be practices in place to sufficiently protect the staff through social distancing and wearing of masks when unable to keep proper social distancing. Vulnerable employees should be allowed to continue remote work or given responsibilities that minimize interaction with the public.

Allow flexibility for employees caring for sick family members or with childcare responsibilities. Limit the number of non-employees allowed in the office at the same time based on office facilities, size and plans to maintain proper social distancing space.

Alternative Phase can be adopted in place of Phase 1 and 2.

Phase 1 - Limited re-entry; “minimal” staffing of county Extension offices (i.e., one employee at a time). Offices remain closed to the public. The employee staffing the office might ensure essential activities are performed, such as routing soil samples (collected using social distancing, perhaps a drop-off point outside the office) or pesticide applicator re-certification. Consider limiting hours or days for any time spent by the employee in the office as a means of limiting re-entry.

After at least 14 days in Phase 1 with no increase in cases, counties may choose to enter Phase 2. An increase in new cases indicates the county should remain in Phase 1 until new cases decline. A spike in cases may indicate need to return to Phase 0.

Phase 2 - Extension office is open to the public but maintains minimal staffing (i.e., one employee at a time). Limit the number of non-employees allowed in the office at the same time to one person at a time. Counties may consider planned staffing rotation. See “Social Distance Recommendations for Phases 2 – 3.”

After at least 14 days in Phase 2 with no increase in cases, counties may choose to enter Phase 3. An increase in new cases indicates the county should remain in Phase 2 or move back to Phase 1 until new cases decline. A spike in cases may indicate need to return to Phase 0.

Phase 3 - Extension office is open to the public and employees working remotely may return to the office. Counties with larger staff may consider continuing to limit the number of employees in the office at one time, planning a rotation system where the same employees work together on certain days. Vulnerable employees should be allowed to continue remote work or given responsibilities that minimize interaction with the public. Allow flexibility for employees caring for sick family members or with childcare responsibilities. Limit the number of non-employees allowed in the office at the same time based on office plans to maintain proper social distancing space in the reception area.

An increase or spike in cases may indicate a need to return to prior phases. We are unable to provide a guideline or timeframe at this point for entering phase 4 (e.g. declining case counts, etc.). There are many factors impacting when and how Extension offices will operate in a post-COVID-19 climate.

Phase 4 - Operations resume as near normal as practical before the pandemic. Offices should continue to follow CDC guidelines and UT Extension guidelines. Counties should continue to monitor COVID-19 data on a daily basis and adjust reopening phases as needed.

Questionnaire on the following page

The purpose of this questionnaire is for you to self-observe your health prior to coming to work. You are expected to complete this checklist before you come to work every day. You do not have to turn this checklist in but please notify your supervisor of your results.

Be aware of COVID-19 symptoms. These symptoms are currently associated with COVID-19 infection:

- Fever, cough, and shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Chills, repeated shaking with chills, and muscle pain
- Headache
- Sore throat
- Loss of taste or smell

Check temperature. Employees are required to do self-temperature checks before coming to the workplace and to stay home if they have a fever. Normal temperature should not exceed 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit. Units are not expected to check employee temperatures.

Self-isolate. Employees in these categories, per CDC guidelines, are required to self-isolate for at least 14 days.

- Anyone with symptoms of possible COVID-19 infection or known to be positive with COVID-19 infection.
- Anyone who has had close contact with someone known to be diagnosed with COVID-19. Close contact means being within about six feet of a person diagnosed with COVID-19 for a prolonged period of time (that is, more than a few minutes). Close contact can occur while caring for, living with, visiting, or sharing a health care waiting area with someone who has COVID-19. Close contact also means having direct contact with secretions (typically cough and sneezes) from a person with COVID-19.
- Anyone arriving back in the U.S. after traveling in another country.
- Anyone arriving from a cruise ship (ocean or river).
- Anyone traveling from areas or cities within the U.S. where community spread of COVID-19 is ongoing. Travelers must check with state or local authorities at the starting point of their journey, along with their route, and at their planned destination to learn about local circumstances and any restrictions that may be in place.

Employees who develop any symptoms of COVID-19 during self-isolation should contact their health care provider, or if needed, their local emergency room.

One you begin your workday, continue to observe yourself for any changes such as fever, coughing and/or difficulty breathing.

What to do if your condition changes while at work or at home:

If you feel feverish or develop a cough or have difficulty breathing during the self-observation period, you should:

- Take your temperature and write it down: _____
- Self-isolate (6-feet distance between you and others)
- Seek advice by telephone from your healthcare provider or local health department