

Guidelines for a partial reactivation of laboratory research activities

Introduction

We continue to acquire new information about the coronavirus (COVID-19) and its spread, but the months ahead remain filled with uncertainty. Current trends indicate that this uncertainty is likely to be a prolonged event. This has significant implications about raising the level of research activity in research labs, as doing so will likely take place over a time when social distancing still needs to be practiced to avoid rampant spread and a renewed crisis. Governor DeWine has presented a phased plan to “reopen” Ohio, and NEOMED is working to best understand that intent and to provide guidance related to getting back to the business of being a University in the framework of continued social distancing.

Guidelines about how this can be accomplished related to benchtop research are discussed below. This guidance applies to NEOMED faculty/staff; scientists and staff from Akron Children’s Hospital utilizing leased spaces at NEOMED; and REDIzone clients utilizing laboratory spaces in the REDIzone. We welcome any comments.

Guidelines

1. **Remote Work.** Faculty may attest that they voluntarily intend to return to NEOMED to conduct necessary laboratory-based research on a “need to be there” basis. Up to one laboratory staff member may be identified and voluntarily agree to support the faculty member and their research on a “need to be there” basis. This guidance is not intended to replace work that can be done remotely. Laboratory and office occupancy should be held only to the necessary minimum.
 - a. All group meetings, project discussions and seminars should continue to be conducted remotely.
 - b. As needed, returning faculty and staff may occupy their offices for limited times with their office doors closed. Only one person may be in the office at a time.

2. **Limits on laboratory personnel numbers.** Social distancing guidelines recommend separation distances of 6 ft or more. We recommend that no more than one person per 360 sq. ft. of lab space be allowed in RGE at any one time. As a reference, this means one person per bay in RGE. Laboratories in other buildings must best determine occupancy standards to the square footage basis of that provided for RGE and the design of those laboratory spaces. Individual PIs can request exceptions to these limits but they must be approved by their department chair and the VP for Research. The use of procedure rooms (e.g., tissue culture suites, animal surgery suites, etc.) throughout RGE and other buildings should be limited to one person at a time if at all possible and scheduled in advance with reservation sheets posted .

Minimize as far as possible lab procedures requiring more than one person in close proximity. If these procedures are absolutely necessary, the individuals involved should wear PPE (masks, gloves and eye protection) and treat each other as if they have COVID-19 but are asymptomatic.

3. **Implementation of shifts.** If necessary shift schedules can be considered to ensure social distancing. Shifts are probably best organized within individual labs, but should be coordinated with other units within building or building floor.
4. **Limits on office use and occupancy.** As noted above, office work should continue to take place at remote locations (at home). For those engaged in laboratory work, and for rare research tasks requiring access to individual offices, office occupation should be limited to one person. For office spaces larger than 400 sq.ft., exceptions may be possible, but need to be pre-approved by Department Chairs. Doors must remain closed when offices are occupied.
5. **PPE requirements.** Face masks are required in all common areas (hallways, restrooms, break areas). Face masks must be worn in public and any time there is more than one person in a given space, including times of brief interaction between co-workers or friends, and anytime another person is within six feet. (Employees working alone in their office do not need to wear a mask when in that office.) Clean and disinfect personal and shared work areas (desktop, keyboards, chairs, etc.) before and after use. Treat everything as if it is contaminated. Wash hands frequently. Avoid touching face, eyes and mouth.
6. **CMU.** Access to the CMU will follow the same policies in place during the stay at home order for faculty/staff managing animal colonies and conducting procedures. For further details contact the CMU office.