

Research Continuity Guidance for UNMHSC Laboratories and Research Facilities

The University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center (UNMHSC) continues to closely monitor the outbreak of coronavirus COVID-19. With the ongoing concern about the spread of this disease, laboratories and research facilities should begin to plan for the possibility of a significant disruption to normal operations.

Given the diverse nature of research performed at UNMHSC, and the variety of requirements specific to each unique research program, we feel that each laboratory or research facility is best positioned to create a continuity plan that will meet their unique needs. The guidance below is provided to facilitate the development of that plan.

Guidance for UNMHSC Components Conducting Clinical Trials:

As always, protecting the safety and welfare of research participants who have volunteered to participate in our studies is paramount. We must maintain compliance with human research requirements to both support the protection of participants and the scientific integrity of our research protocols. In addition, we are committed to protecting the safety and welfare of our faculty and staff who are conducting this critically important work in the face of an evolving public health challenge the magnitude of which remains to be determined.

- As always, any non-emergent change to your study design must be reported to the IRB.
- Participants in clinical trials should continue to receive standard of care and/or experimental treatment of their disease as usual. Support staff for these trials may be designated as essential staff and shall be available.
- Clinical Trials that do not provide standard of care and/or experimental treatment of participants' disease will be examined on a case-by-case basis. Support staff for these trials may be designated as essential staff. For specific details on how to handle different types of patients, please refer to the policies and procedures from the Health Sciences Center Emergency Operations Command.

- Investigational Drugs – If research participants are receiving investigational drugs, determine what the plan would be if the investigational drug could not be dispensed to them. You might find a way to deliver investigational drugs to their home. If the investigational drugs cannot be dispensed to research participants, consider plans to transition research participants to the most appropriate clinically available medications. This transition should include consultations with the IRB, the Sponsor (if applicable), investigational drug service and the clinical team caring for the research participants.
- Research Procedures – PIs need to assess whether any reduction in staff makes it unsafe to complete the planned research procedures. For example, starting IVs might not be easy or safe if experienced staff are not available.
- Timely review of research data – If research team members are not available, integration of research care such as reviewing lab results in a timely manner might not be possible and will require special attention under the direction of the study PI. Study teams should consider the availability of appropriate back-ups to the PI to make safety assessments.
- Utilization of alternate visit options including telephone or Zoom visits for participants who are unable or unwilling to come to on-site visits.

Guidance for Research Involving the Animal Resource Facility:

- The University of New Mexico Animal Resource Facility will maintain critical functions.
- ARF staff are essential personnel and unless individuals are sick and/or contagious, they will report to ARF during normal or altered duty hours to provide necessary animal care.
- Attempts will be made to contact all research investigators to inform them of status of their animals and the animal care team. If necessary to conserve priority models, the Attending Veterinarian and/or other ARF leadership will discuss priorities of research and respective models with study teams.

Assumptions that you can use for planning, based on a scenario with widespread COVID-19 communal transmission:

- A significant percentage of your workforce may be out sick or unable to come to work.
- Essential research infrastructure, such as power and telecommunications, will be maintained.
- Orders for critical supplies may be delayed.

- Processing of visas by the federal government may be delayed, resulting in delayed appointments.
- Core facilities and other fee-for-service resources may not be available.
- Repairs performed by Facilities Management may be delayed.
- Decontamination of your workspace may be necessary in the event of a local illness.
- UNMHSC will communicate any disruptions to research space and laboratory access.

Steps you can take now to ensure continuity of critical functions:

- Identify procedures and processes that require regular personnel attention (e.g. cell culture maintenance, animal studies).
- Assess and prioritize critical laboratory activities.
- Identify any research experiments that can be ramped down, curtailed, or delayed.
- Identify personnel able to safely perform essential activities.
- Ensure that you have access to contact information for your critical staff.
- Cross-train research staff to fill in for others who may be out sick or unable to come to work.
 - Ensure staff have the appropriate training.
 - Consider documenting critical step-by-step instructions.
- Coordinate with colleagues who have similar research activities to identify ways to ensure coverage of critical activities.
- Review contingency plans and emergency procedures with researchers and staff.
- Maintain a sufficient inventory of critical supplies that may be impacted by global shipping delays.
- Consider installing remote control monitoring devices for critical equipment (e.g., -80C freezers, liquid nitrogen storage drawers, incubators).

Measures you can take to prevent the spread of illness among your group if the risk of COVID-19 increases within the UNMHSC community:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for 20 seconds. As always, hand sanitizer is not a substitute for hand washing in the laboratory.
- Disinfect common laboratory areas and touch points with 70% ethanol (e.g. doorknobs, sink handles, freezer doors, fume hood sashes, telephones).
- Remind staff to stay home when they are not feeling well.
- Consider alternating work schedules to meet the demands of the laboratory while limiting close contact with others.

- Identify work that can be done from home or remotely, such as data analysis.
 - Test and update remote work technologies such as VPN and Zoom conferencing.
 - Note: VPN access may be limited, and you may need to prioritize access for your group.
- Avoid in-person meetings. Use remote work technologies such as Zoom conferencing.

Other safety considerations:

- The Radiation Safety Team are essential staff and will be available.
- Ensure that individuals performing critical tasks have been adequately trained and understand whom to contact with technical or safety questions.
- Avoid performing high-risk procedures alone. When working alone is necessary, exercise maximum caution.
- Notify colleagues of your schedule when working alone for an extended period of time.
- Ensure that high-risk materials (radioactive, biohazards, chemicals) are secured.