

Operational Guidelines for Vestals Gap Ventures Clients during COVID-19

This document is a working list of our recommendations to guide adventure course operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Please note this is not an exhaustive list. The intention is to provide some basic guidance in operating during COVID-19. There are other documents that we have created that go into further detail about some of the topics discussed here.

Be prepared and flexible as the situation develops, as new information comes available, and new recommendations arise. Stay up-to-date with recommendations from The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). You must regularly check the guidelines from your Authorities Having Jurisdiction (AHJs) including national, state, and county/local levels to ensure compliance with their recommendations. Because AHJ guidelines vary widely, you will have to make the appropriate decisions for your facility. We encourage you to have documented COVID-19 policies and procedures for your site, as we always recommend having written Local Operating Procedures (LOP).

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. SARS-CoV-2 was first identified during an investigation into an outbreak in Wuhan, China. The disease is primarily spread between people who are in close (approx. 6 feet) contact, through respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It also may be possible, although much less likely, that a person can contract COVID-19 by touching a surface or object contaminated with SARS-CoV-2 and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes (fomite transmission). The [CDC COVID-19 Information Homepage](#) is an important source of the latest information.

Vestals Gap Ventures has been paying close attention to the Coronavirus pandemic to keep you, our valued clients, as up to date as possible on how to operate during this unprecedented time. We have consulted with industry professionals, equipment manufacturers, the ACCT, and other knowledgeable sources. Much has changed since the pandemic began, and will continue to change as more information about the virus becomes known. Throughout 2020, we published numerous documents covering our recommendations on a variety of operational topics. While much of that information is still applicable, we think there is some basic information that applies to virtually all courses:

1. **SOCIAL DISTANCING-** EVERYONE should practice social distancing whenever possible. This means staying at least 6 feet away from other people. Closer distances can aid in the ability for respiratory droplet transmission between individuals.
2. **MASKS-** Cloth face coverings should be worn whenever a six-foot distance cannot be maintained. These must completely cover the nose and mouth to be effective. They are also recommended when indoors with other people, even if social distancing can be achieved.
3. **RESPIRATORY ETIQUETTE-** This includes covering coughs and sneezes with tissues. Tissues should be disposed of promptly. If no tissues are available, people should cough or sneeze into their elbow or shoulder.
4. **HAND WASHING-** EVERYONE should wash their hands frequently. This includes before and after participating in **each** activity; before and after breaks; before and after meals and snacks; before touching eyes, nose, or mouth; after coughing/sneezing/blowing your nose; after handling garbage; after touching objects handled by other people; and after using the bathroom. If soap and water is not available, hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol should be used. Hand sanitizer is not as effective as proper hand washing with soap and water.
5. **LOCATION-** As much as possible, interactions with others should take place outdoors. The virus is much less transmissible outdoors. If any interaction will take place indoors, increase ventilation by opening windows, doors, and turning on fans (if available). Consider relocating indoor check in, sales, and other customer service interactions outside if possible. For indoor facilities, reduce your capacity to allow for proper distancing.
6. **COVID SCREENING-** This is an important step to reduce the likelihood of exposure to SARS-CoV-2. Proper screening can help protect your staff, participants, and anyone else around. Note that COVID screening is in addition to the normal participant screening that should take place for all challenge course participants. Depending on your operation, screening may have to take place a few days prior to the arrival of participants in addition to upon arrival.

Engage the client to help with screening as much as possible. For instance, requiring the client to do temperature checks before arrival can save a lot of time. More detail about screening is provided below.

GENERAL OPERATION

The CDC has published numerous documents, including this important [Community Reopening Guidance](#) for businesses, [Guidance for Employers](#), and other useful information. Additionally, you should familiarize yourself and your employees with OSHA's [Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19](#).

We encourage our clients to come up with their own Emergency Action Procedures for COVID-19. Prior to opening for participants, your staff should be familiar with these procedures for COVID-19. If you decide to modify any activities, staff will need time to practice these new procedures. Staff should be trained on established cleaning routines, increased personal hygiene, how to screen and interact with participants, and what to do if anyone feels sick or displays symptoms.

In addition to cloth face coverings, the use of other personal protective equipment (PPE) may be prudent in certain situations. PPE can include gloves, eye protection, and other items. The latest information, including from this [NIH study on fomite transmission](#), has shown that SARS-CoV-2 is much less likely to be spread by contact with contaminated surfaces and/or objects (fomite transmission). You should create policies regarding the use (or non-use) of PPE based on your current state and/or local requirements.

Participants who choose to attend your programs should be made aware that while your organization is responding with increased vigilance, there is an elevated risk for disease transmission in places that have a high volume of people coming through. Responsible personal hygiene routines for staff and participants alike are expected. Communicate your policies and expectations in advance. Offering refunds or rescheduling for participants who cancel or do not pass screening can help them make the right decision for them, which includes the decision to stay home.

During operation facilities should have available and accessible for staff and participants (may vary based on AHJ guidance):

- Additional hand washing facilities
- Hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol
- Disinfectant wipes and sprays
- Tissues, paper towels, and trash receptacles
- Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) such as face coverings, gloves, eye protection, etc. based on AHJ guidance

SCREENING STAFF AND PARTICIPANTS

Staff and participants should stay at home if not feeling well or be sent home if they are sick. Implementing additional screening will reduce the possibility of disease transmission. Screening can include verbal or written questions, visual observation of cold or flu-like symptoms, and/or temperature taking. Be advised that these can change frequently as new information becomes known. If any staff or participant tests positive for SARS-CoV-2/ COVID-19 within 14 days of the program, they should let you know and follow care procedures laid out by the CDC and their health care provider. Follow the [CDC What to Do if you are Sick](#) recommendations if you are feeling unwell. The following questions and symptom lists are based on the [CDC Symptoms of Coronavirus](#) page and are accurate as of the date this document was updated.

Questions to Ask

- Are you feeling healthy and well today?
- Have you tested positive for COVID-19 within the last 14 days?
- Have you been in close contact with a person known to have tested positive for COVID-19 within the last 14 days?
- Have you recently traveled or been in known contact with anyone who recently traveled to: Brazil, China, Iran, Most European countries, United Kingdom, or Ireland? In the United States, check the [CDC COVID-19 Data Tracker](#) for the latest information on hot spots.
- Have you recently experienced any of the following symptoms of COVID-19? NOTE: This list is not all possible symptoms. It is also possible to experience no symptoms at all (asymptomatic cases).

- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fever of **100.4°F/38.0°C or above**
- Chills
- Fatigue
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- New loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Have you recently experienced any of the following Emergency Warning Signs? **If yes, call 911 or your local emergency facility, and notify the operator that you are seeking care for someone who has or may have COVID-19.**
 - Trouble breathing
 - Persistent pain or pressure in the chest
 - New confusion
 - Inability to wake or stay awake
 - Bluish face or lips

CLEANING

Because fomite transmission is less likely, and because of cross-contamination issues, wearing gloves during activities is probably not very useful in preventing spread of the virus. However, they are probably useful when facility cleaning and disinfecting is taking place.

Cleaning removes visible dirt, debris, and germs from surfaces. You can use soap and water to clean surfaces. Cleaning doesn't kill germs, but by removing them, it lowers their numbers and the risk of infection. It is suggested to clean surfaces before disinfecting them. According to the CDC, "Normal routine cleaning with soap and water will decrease how much of the virus is on surfaces and objects, which reduces the risk of exposure."

Disinfecting kills microscopic organisms (germs) on surfaces. Disinfectant chemicals are stronger than soap, although they do not necessarily clean visibly dirty surfaces or remove germs. Killing germs after cleaning a surface can lower the risk of infection. To properly disinfect, products need to remain on a surface for a specific amount of time, usually 3-5 minutes.

Cleaning Your Facility

You will have to decide what parts of your facility to clean, and how often cleaning should take place. High-contact areas can include, and are not limited to:

- Greeting/check-in areas, retail spaces, Point-of-Sale (POS) Systems
- Briefing, gear-up, and orientation areas
- Shared items like tables, chairs, doorknobs, light switches, pens, devices, railings, etc.
- Accommodations, conference rooms, and classrooms
- Food preparation and service areas
- Bathroom facilities
- Vehicle interior, switches, knobs, door handles, etc.
- Challenge course components like staples, handlines, climbing holds, etc. (see below)

The items you decide to clean, and the frequency the cleaning takes place, can be affected by many factors. Location (indoor vs. outdoor), amount of time between uses, and participant volume will play a large role in determining cleaning policy decisions. Although the likelihood of fomite transmission is generally low, if someone contacts these items after touching their face, or sneezes or coughs directly on the item without a mask in place, the presence of potentially contaminated particles is increased. For high-contact challenge course components, it's probably best to wash hands before and after use as an alternative to constant/frequent cleaning. The CDC has published [Cleaning and Disinfection](#)

[guidelines](#). The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) published a [list of registered disinfectants](#) for use against SARS-CoV-2.

Cleaning Your Gear

We have published a separate document detailing our recommendations on how to clean challenge course life safety equipment during COVID-19. These can be found at [COVID 19 EAP VGV Cleaning Life Safety Equipment](#). While keeping gear clean is always a good idea, constant sanitation of gear is not really necessary beyond helmets. The exception would be where someone sneezes or coughs directly on the gear or activity without a mask in place. If and when you need to sanitize gear, make certain to follow the protocols published by the manufacturer (see our links). We would also recommend issuing gear to each participant instead of sharing equipment between individuals during a program.

OUTFITTING PARTICIPANTS

When outfitting participants, limit contact wherever and whenever possible. Your procedure modifications may include, and are not limited to:

- Conducting briefing and outfitting outdoors whenever possible
- Concise verbal instruction with staff socially distanced
- Larger briefing space so participants can socially distance
- Everyone wears masks if distancing cannot be maintained
- Hand washing before outfitting and after returning equipment
- Clear demonstrations
- Visual checks replacing physical checks
- Video briefings or signage
- Tracking/tagging gear usage to ensure appropriate cleaning routines between uses
- Staff wash hands or use hand sanitizer after helping a participant having difficulty adjusting their own equipment
- Staff wear PPE if they help participants having difficulty adjusting their own equipment

OPERATING ACTIVITIES

We recognize that it might not be possible to fully limit contact between people, contact with the environment, and contact with equipment, especially at certain elements. Contact between people could involve staff to participant, participant to participant, staff to staff, staff to non-participating individual, etc. We recommend evaluating all the activities you offer and coming up with practical modifications or alternatives wherever possible. You may also decide to cease operating certain activities or elements until an effective therapeutic treatment or vaccine is readily available.

Use guidance from your AHJs regarding limits to group size. There are a number of possible strategies to structure groups based on the type of organization, activity, population, etc. For instance, commercial courses might limit groups to arrivals from the same family or vehicle. Summer camps and residential facilities could use pods, cohorts, or similar systems to keep the same groups of people together. These factors could make it more or less feasible to conduct challenge course activities without modifications.

Brief interactions which take place closer than 6' distance are not considered a risk as long as masks are worn, and other recommended protocols are in place. This would apply when connecting a participant to a safety system, zip launch, belay etc. However, prolonged close proximity should be avoided (i.e. traditional group spotting of low elements), except possibly when operating with groups in long-term cohorts or similar types of participant grouping types.

The following are a variety of possible strategies and considerations for limiting contact on activities. These are not all possibilities, and it is likely that some do not apply to your operation. Strategies should be selected based on your protocols and needs and may need to be modified from what is described.

Commercial Zip Tours and Aerial Parks

- Limit size of each tour
- Increase time between tours

- Require hand washing before and after tour
- Require staff and/or participants wear a mask
- Require staff and/or participants wear other PPE, if needed (clip in, rescues, belaying, etc.)
- Utilize verbal and visual Hands on Checks to limit contact
- Wipe frequent contact points after each tour, each day, etc.
- Clearly identify observation areas for non-participating guests with sufficient space and distance
- Staff should carry hand sanitizer, tissues, trash bags, and/or wipes on the tour
- Wear disposable gloves inside braking gloves. Braking gloves should be washed after use. Or include braking gloves in the price of the tour and customers take them home.
- Each staff member uses an assigned gear set

Traditional High Courses

- Require hand washing before and after each activity
- Require face coverings worn by all staff and participants
- Utilize verbal and visual Hands on Checks to limit contact
- Participants on Aqua Zips should remove their masks prior to launch
- Limit contact while helping participants exit from a zip line
- Clearly identify observation areas for non-participating guests with sufficient space and distance
- Provide nearby trash receptacles
- Wipe carabiners, belay devices, and/or other frequent contacted items between uses
- Increase distance between participants in haul and/or belay teams (Flying Squirrel, Giant Swing, Pamper Pole w/Justrite, etc.)
- To limit spotting, keep a tight belay when climber is near ground
- Each staff member uses an assigned gear set

Climbing Programs

- Require hand washing before and after each climb
- Provide nearby trash receptacles
- Utilize verbal and visual Hands on Checks to limit contact
- Wipe carabiners and belay devices between uses
- To limit spotting, use mats if available, and keep a tight belay when climber is near ground
- Make beginning of climbing routes easy to avoid falls while close to ground
- Waiting areas should allow for social distancing
- Each staff member uses an assigned gear set

Anchorless Belays (if/when a permanent ground anchor is not present)

- Build an anchor on a tree, rock, or other appropriate fixed or heavy object (not compatible with running belay elements).
- Girth hitch a short sling to back of belayer's harness to provide a "handhold" for a human anchor, so the human anchor does not have to contact the belayer's harness directly. The sling must be short to allow for the appropriate angle in keeping the belayer properly anchored. The "anchor" person holding the sling should stay low to ground. Depending on your protocols, this could require the anchor person and/or belayer to wear masks.
- Belayer uses no anchor if they are *heavier than* the climber; **NOTE:** this should only be done as a temporary procedure during COVID-19. VGV generally requires belayers to use some type of anchor at all times.
- For running belay elements, install a horizontal cable along the entire length of the element. The belayer then builds an anchor with a lanyard attached to harness. This would require proper installation of ground anchors and a cable system. These create trip hazards, are prone to rust, and are not an ideal solution.

Low Challenge Course

- Limit or avoid spotting activities
- Limit or avoid lifting activities
- Require hand washing before and after each element
- Require face coverings worn by all staff and participants
- Require other PPE worn during each element

- Lift objects instead of people
- Select activities that require less contact or proximity
- Increase the use of “no prop” activities to avoid use of shared items
- If shared items must be used, clean and disinfect before and after use
- Use spotting nets and/or mats (may require installation)
- Replace spotters with a long PVC pipe or dowel for balance elements (Mohawk Walk, other Complex Elements, most Spotted Individual elements, etc.); participants hold the pipe 6’ apart. PVC is easy to clean between uses.
- Instead of a PVC pipe/dowel as a spotting replacement, use a length of rope or webbing in the same manner. This eliminates the possibility of injury from a hard material like PVC.
- For balance elements, require participants to step down when they lose balance to minimize need for spotting. Consider the age and ability level of the participants, and the height of the element(s), before using this option.

Adventure Programming Alternatives that Adapt Well for Social Distancing

- Orienteering activities- map, compass, geocaching, etc.
- Scavenger hunts
- Activities that incorporate radio or remote communication
- Hiking
- Bird watching
- Nature Identification- trees, plants, insects, birds, mammals, reptiles, etc.
- Outdoor Skills classes
- Incorporating academic content into challenge course activities

EMERGENCY PROCEDURES

Course Assists and Rescues

Any staff performing assists and rescues faces increased potential for exposure to SARS-CoV-2 because of the close contact and prolonged proximity involved. A rule of thumb has always been to do the simplest solution to accomplish the task, like the old lifeguarding saying, “reach, throw, row, tow, go.” Rescue staff have to take this to heart while COVID-19 is still a pandemic. You should discuss with all rescue staff what PPE would make them feel comfortable while performing physical assists and rescues. Also take the time to consider rescue prevention strategies. Be sure to update your Emergency Action Plan (EAP) and LOP to reflect the new policies and procedures for rescues during COVID-19.

Before attempting a physical assist or rescue, the rescuer must be certain that there are no other options available to allow for participant self-rescue. Don’t overlook the simple solutions. Is there something nearby that they’re overlooking as a potential handhold or foothold? Are they within reach of a ladder? Can a rope or other equipment be sent to them that they can use themselves? Are they in the most effective body position to effect the self-rescue? Can they simply take a breath, relax, focus, and make one concentrated attempt instead of panicking and/or tiring themselves out with many ineffective attempts? Think about possible ways to prevent physical assists and rescues for the type(s) of activities at your course.

Commercial Zip Tours

- Increasing ground school briefing and demonstration
- Allowing for increased ground school practice in regard to:
 - Proper body position
 - Proper hand braking
 - Signals and verbal instruction from guides
 - Avoiding panic if participant does not reach the platform
 - Hand position to avoid roll-back
 - Ability to perform hand-over-hand self-rescue
 - Do not allow participants on tour if unable to perform these techniques
- Increased awareness of unique characteristics of each line (speed, braking characteristics, etc.) and communicating these to participants as necessary
- Staff awareness of weather conditions (wind speed, direction etc.)
- In the event staff must perform a client tow, use a longer lanyard between staff and client (6’+)

Traditional and Commercial High Elements

- Increasing ground school briefing and demonstration
- Allowing for increased ground school practice in regard to:
 - Use of the belay system
 - Identification of traffic flow, easy/difficult elements, etc.
 - Proper belay transfers (lobster claw, smart belay system, etc.)
 - Proper use of Vertical Protection Systems (VPS)
 - Procedures for transferring to any Egress elements (QuickFlight/QuickJump, Zip Line, etc.)
 - Do not allow participants on elements if unable to demonstrate proper technique
- Demonstration and practice of self-recovery technique
 - Feet wide apart, legs straight, pushing away from element
 - Arms hold onto element features or safety lanyard
 - Use legs and arms to get back up
 - Get staff attention if unable to self-recover
 - Using course features for self-recovery as available (staples, handlines, platforms, etc.)
- Modifying or closing difficult elements
- Specifying traffic flow direction
- Identifying all course exit options, including “early exits” (if present)
- Increase staff communication, advice, coaching
- Help participants make appropriate choices (proper level of challenge without requiring physical assistance)
- Staff vigilance in monitoring for exhaustion, dehydration, inappropriate level of challenge, etc.

Possible Uses of Available Rescue & Assist Equipment (as applicable)

- Etrier
 - Climbing aid
 - Throw rope/reach extension
 - Tow device
- 3:1 Raise/Assist system
 - Lift assist- can orient to pull “down” or “up” to raise depending on situation
 - Reach extension
 - Tow device
 - May be long enough for person on ground to help with lift
- Extra carabiner(s)
 - Use to shorten lobster claw so the instructor can self-recover
 - Clip one lobster claw to harness belay loop, and attach extra carabiner in middle of this claw
 - This allows instructor to have both hands free to work
 - Assists & rescues are even harder to execute while trying to maintain balance
- Leather “rescue” gloves
 - Instructor use on zip rescue
 - Instructor use to traverse difficult elements en route to help participant
 - Participant use to recover if grip is difficult
 - Do not confuse with medical gloves

Course Evacuation

You will also have to update your Emergency Procedures for course evacuation. The causes for evacuation could be inclement weather and medical emergency. Update your evacuation procedures while considering the following:

- Total number of staff, participants, and non-participant guests at the facility
- Capacity of emergency/storm shelter location(s) before COVID-19
- Capacity of emergency/storm shelter location(s) DURING COVID-19
 - To allow for proper social distancing, capacity will be reduced
 - Type of ventilation system present
 - Possibility to increase ventilation by opening doors and windows, using fans, etc.
- If the original shelter does not have enough capacity, consider the following:
 - Using additional appropriate buildings as shelters
 - If using multiple shelters, procedures to account for each person and their location

- If using multiple shelters, evacuation routes to the nearest shelter
- Reducing the capacity of your facility to the limit of your shelter(s) with social distancing
- Requiring all persons present to wear mask if social distancing is not possible

These preventative procedures should be adhered to until the spread of COVID-19 is contained. These are good steps to follow to reduce the risk of infection, but they are not a solution! Please check in frequently with local and national public health authorities, the CDC website, and reputable news sources for updates and procedural changes.

RESOURCES

[See our separate COVID Resources Document](#)

Vestals Gap Ventures is a Professional Vendor Member of the Association for Challenge Course Technology
Copyright © 2020, Vestals Gap Ventures, LLC

