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**September 4th: COVID-19 Updates – Graduate Students & Postdocs Impact**

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To: gsstudents-all@lists.mssm.edu, postdocs@lists.mssm.edu

Cc: "# gs-mta-directors (MSSM)" &lt;gs-mta-directors@mssm.edu&gt;, gs-masters-directors@lists.mssm.edu, gs-staff@lists.mssm.edu

# COVID-19 Updates – Graduate Students & Postdocs Impact

**September 4, 2020**

## Heartfelt Appreciation for All That You Do

Dear Students and Postdocs,

Your commitment and dedication to Mount Sinai's basic science and translational research enterprise during this unprecedented time continues to be an inspiration for all of us. Your contributions have not gone unnoticed, and we will make sure to bring them to the attention of the Board of Trustees during upcoming meetings this month.

So many of us, at Mount Sinai, in New York, and around the world, have been asked to push forward and to keep doing more, even while we are simultaneously expected to make sacrifices. It is not easy to show up for our coworkers, to press on with our research, and to look after one another, at a time when the potential detriments to all our mental and physical health range from smaller inconveniences, such as not being able to visit easily with friends, to very serious threats to the health of family and loved ones. The current times are not easy for us, and so we know they are not easy for you, either.

Your enthusiasm, generosity, and incessant work during one of the most challenging times in your personal and professional lives exemplify the spirit of Mount Sinai and make us extremely proud of our trainees.

A very heartfelt thank-you for all you are doing,

Marta Filizola and Eric Nestler

## Scientific Basis for No Routine, Universal COVID-19 Testing

There has been considerable debate—both scientific and political—about the value of mass-testing individuals for SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19). Certain colleges and universities have instituted routine (weekly or even more frequent) viral testing for all undergraduate students as part of their reopening strategies, although testing of graduate and professional students and faculty remains voluntary on most campuses.

Our position is that there is no compelling scientific basis for routine, universal testing under the current circumstances. First, infection rates in the NY metropolitan area are extremely low at the present time: the percent of tests that will come back positive would be infinitesimally small. Second, getting a negative test result means little when one is feeling well; tomorrow one may be ill and have a virus level high enough to possibly give a positive result. Third, the SARS-CoV-2 testing platforms that are amenable to testing many thousands of people on a regular basis have very high false negative results—up to 40% in some studies. A negative result is therefore even less useful than meets the eye. Conversely, in the setting of low incidence in the community, the likelihood of false positive results increases when testing asymptomatic persons. By contrast, testing asymptomatic persons who are returning from an area with high risk for transmission is useful. Fourth, from an epidemiological point of view, routine testing—in the face of rare infection—is only useful when everyone involved is in a bubble—truly quarantined. Students in Aron Hall, whether graduate or medical students, do not even remotely fall into this category. Finally, a negative test result under these conditions can give people false confidence to let their guard down with respect to recommended precautions (universal masking, social distancing, etc.).

A far more effective regime—which we are following—is to monitor community rates of positivity in both the Mount Sinai community as well as more broadly throughout NYC, through targeted testing, and to assiduously test people who become symptomatic or who have known close contacts. We then perform contact tracing and isolate people who test positive and furlough their close contacts. An important feature is to pay particularly close attention to those with underlying conditions who are more susceptible to the deleterious effects of SARS-CoV-2 infection.

Schools that are performing weekly or more frequent testing of students are doing so more to demonstrate that they're doing something, not for sound scientific reasons. We think this may be counter-productive by giving people a false sense of security and being lax about general precautions which are extremely effective in preventing infection.

The most effective ways to prevent transmission of COVID-19 remain social distancing and wearing the appropriate personal protective equipment for the situation—in the labs this means a face mask. You should always wear a face covering in public and a surgical mask on campus including in research, clinical, and public arenas.

We will continue to monitor our conditions very closely and keep our community informed.

## Infection Prevention Updates for Students from the ISMMS Education Infection Prevention Team

Dear Students,

We are writing with some Infection Prevention (IP) updates since our last communications. We will send another more comprehensive update next week that addresses testing data as well as other infection prevention topics. As a reminder below are the general IP guidelines that must be strictly followed on and off campus:

### General Infection Prevention Guidelines

All members of our community must:

- Social distance whenever possible
- Practice frequent hand hygiene
- Wear face coverings in public
- Wear surgical masks in the school arena
- Clean high-touch surfaces

### Exposures and Contact Tracing

We have had two recent situations in which students were exposed to a known positive person with COVID-19. **Both were social contacts.** Students with an exposure to a known positive person with documented COVID-19 are contacted by both Mount Sinai and New York City contact tracers. Close contacts are required to quarantine for 14 days. Close contacts have a PCR test 5-7 days after contact in order to establish whether isolation is necessary, but must complete their 14-day quarantine even with a negative PCR. To avoid being a close contact, always practice social distancing and mask wearing.

**Note that the definitions of close contact in the healthcare setting (clinical arena) and the educational, research or social setting are different, per CDC, state and institutional guidance.**

If a [close contact occurs in the healthcare setting](#) (clinical arena), it is defined by **Mount Sinai Healthcare System** as an interaction within the previous 48 hours with a person who has tested positive for COVID-19 where all the following criteria are met:

- **The interaction was longer than 15 minutes**
- The interaction occurred closer than 6 feet apart
- One participant or both participants were not wearing a face covering\*

If a [close contact occurs in an educational, research or social setting](#)\*, it is defined by NYS Department of Health as an interaction within the previous 48 hours with a person who has tested positive for COVID-19 where all the following criteria are met:

- **The interaction was longer than 10 minutes**
- The interaction occurred closer than 6 feet apart

*\*The recent NYC DOHMH definition of close contact in a research, educational or social setting is [here](#) and does not allow for closer than 6 feet for longer than 10 minutes even if masked*

We are all in need of social contact so this is challenging. But please protect yourself, your colleagues, your friends, your family and patients. **The students who had a close contact with a known positive had their educational progression disrupted.** This is critically important. They were simply eating lunch with friends and colleagues. These are trying times but we all must be vigilant.

### Testing Results

Thank you to those who have partnered with us during this pandemic. The point prevalence PCR testing, the testing of the incoming students, and the testing of travelers have all been successful. **The incoming student testing is almost done and we will share data and results with you next week when it is complete.** We are also working on a dashboard to share the student related data used in policy decisions, which will be rolled out in the coming weeks. Please stay tuned for more information regarding this.

### Travel

Please continue to fill out the [Travel Registration Form](#) at least one week in advance for each trip you are planning to take, as it is imperative that we follow guidelines to keep each other healthy. **Registering on this form is critical for our ability to alert you of the need for testing and/or quarantining.** Make sure you review the [Travel Policy](#) and [Infection Prevention FAQ](#) before travel. It is your responsibility to be aware of NYS and ISMMS policies regarding quarantine and testing, and how it may affect your health and your academic progress. Note that decisions about testing for students returning from non-hot spot states are made on a case by case basis, taking into account current data trends. If we determine that you require testing after you return, the IP team will reach out to you directly.

We all need to work together to keep our communities healthy. Please know that maintaining public health requires a strong and responsible community that protects one another. We are partnering with Student Council representatives to include student voices in these conversations. If you have questions or concerns please contact us at [StudentInfectionPrevention@lists.mssm.edu](mailto:StudentInfectionPrevention@lists.mssm.edu).

Sincerely,  
The ISMMS Education Infection Prevention Team  
Questions can be directed to: [StudentInfectionPrevention@lists.mssm.edu](mailto:StudentInfectionPrevention@lists.mssm.edu)

## Health / Wellness Resources

**Student Health is unable to accept walk-in visits due to social distancing requirements. Please schedule appointments via MyChart or by calling 212-241-6023 during regular business hours.**

Some of the mental health resources available to all trainees at Mount Sinai are listed below.

**Center for Stress, Resilience, and Personal Growth**, under the leadership of Dr. Deborah Marin, is available to all faculty, trainees, and staff who would like guidance on how to deal optimally with the stress. Please contact the Center: Tel: 212-659-5564; [MS-CSRPG@mssm.edu](mailto:MS-CSRPG@mssm.edu);  
<https://icahn.mssm.edu/about/departments/psychiatry/clinical/stress-resilience-personal-growth-center>

**Student Trainee Mental Health**  
[STMH@mssm.edu](mailto:STMH@mssm.edu)  
9 am-5 pm: 212-659-8805

After hours 24/7 support hotline dedicated specifically for Mount Sinai Students and Trainees. 212-241-2400 (or 1-866-339-7725).

**Trainee Health and Wellness Committee (THAW)**  
<https://webcommons.mssm.edu/thaw/calendar/events/>

**Wellness events open to all employees through Sinai Calm**  
<https://www.mountsinai.org/about/wellness/ms-calm>

**Resources for reporting mistreatment/harassment**  
[The Ombuds Office](#)  
Tel: 212-659-8848

Mistreatment [Feedback Form](#)

Compliance Hotline (800-853-9212)

## COVID19 Testing for Postdocs

The current [COVID-19 Testing Policy for Employees](#) applies to postdocs and is maintained by Employee Health Services. Please take a moment to review it.

## Postdoc Travel Policy

The MSHS [travel policy](#) for employees, including postdocs, contains significant new quarantine rules, growing out of the New York State policy on “hot spots.” If you are thinking of traveling outside New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania, please review this policy carefully. Also, be sure to check the latest state [hot spot list](#), as it changes frequently. And please know that exceptions to the new quarantine rules will be extremely rare. If you are traveling to a hot spot, you should expect to quarantine when you get back.

## Emergency Postdoctoral Trainee Support Fund

The Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences has established an Emergency Postdoctoral Trainee Support Fund. **Following a generous gift from an initial donor, several faculty members have pledged their financial support to help us grow this new resource.** Please go [here](#) to access instructions for requesting funds, including some updated FAQs. To apply for assistance, complete the [GSBS Emergency Request Form](#). **Applications are now being reviewed, and applicants are being contacted by the Graduate School on a rolling basis.** Applications will be reviewed until the fund has been depleted. You may contact Bradley Gano, Associate Dean for Graduate School Administration, at [bradley.gano@mssm.edu](mailto:bradley.gano@mssm.edu) with any questions.

## Financial Aid Relief Grant for Students

The Emergency Grant provides one-time financial assistance to currently enrolled ISMMS students who are unable to meet immediate essential expenses, because of current hardship related to COVID-19. If you had an emergency attributed to COVID-19, please complete the **ISMMS Emergency Request Form**. You may contact LaVerne Walker, Director of Student Financial Services, at [laverne.walker@mssm.edu](mailto:laverne.walker@mssm.edu) should you have any questions. **Grants will be awarded on a rolling basis and available until the school's allocation has been depleted. Students with immediate need should complete the form as soon as possible.**



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Gsstudents-all mailing list  
[Gsstudents-all@lists.mssm.edu](mailto:Gsstudents-all@lists.mssm.edu)  
<http://lists.mssm.edu/mailman/listinfo/gsstudents-all>

To UNSUBSCRIBE from this list send an empty email to:  
<<mailto:gsstudents-all-request@mssm.edu?subject=unsubscribe>>

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