Suggestions for conducting IAEA Nutrition Studies during the COVID-19 pandemic

Country authorities worldwide are basing their response to COVID-19 on guidelines issued by the World Health Organization (WHO). Each country has defined what is contextually considered essential. Life-saving medical interventions remain essential. Non-COVID-19 related studies involving humans would fall into the non-essential category. In this light, nutritional studies involving the use of stable isotopes and the collection of biological samples (saliva, urine, blood) are not considered critical during the COVID-19 pandemic and decisions to continue running them should be predicated on existing guidelines from national authorities. Due to the rapidly evolving situation further updates to country guidance are possible and likely. Always stay up to date with the latest information from the country’s health authorities and follow local national authority guidelines. Ensure you have all the necessary approvals before you recommence data and sample collection.

Please note that data and sample collection cannot be undertaken with complete physical distance measures in place as the study will require contact with a person for anthropometrical measurements and the collection of biological samples; these factors need to be considered before recommencing a study during the COVID-19 pandemic. Once studies are given permission to recommence, in addition to the country and WHO guidelines, please find suggestions below to decrease the chance of COVID-19 infection during data and sample collection.

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**Train and prepare staff**

- Provide extra training for study team members about the importance of hand hygiene, facemasks, respiratory hygiene, and cough etiquette (see [WHO infographic](https://www.who.int)).
- Ensure that team members know the right ways to put on, use, and take off masks and gloves.
- Recognize the symptoms of COVID-19 (see [CDC infographic](https://www.cdc.gov)). The team should be screened for symptoms and their temperature checked each day.
- Ask team members to stay home if they are sick and send people home if they develop symptoms while at work.

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**Prepare the workplace**

- Emphasize hand hygiene and cough etiquette for everyone who attends the facility and ensure that information posters are visible.
- Provide tissues, alcohol-based hand sanitizer, and trash cans in the waiting room and testing areas. Soap and water should be available at all handwashing sinks and in the restrooms.
- Implement strict routine cleaning and disinfection procedures. Surfaces in the data and sample collection areas should be disinfected after each participant.
All waiting room chairs should be placed at least 1 metre apart (see WHO guidance on adjusting public health and social measures in the context of COVID-19).

Toys, reading materials, or other communal objects, should be removed.

Data and sample collection

On the day before the appointment, contact the participant to ensure that no one in the family has coronavirus or respiratory symptoms. If so, the appointment must be rescheduled.

Schedule appointments so that there is no overlap between study participants; only members from the same household should be in the facility at one time.

Access to the study area must be limited to those members who are essential for data and sample collection. The number of researchers/team members in close contact with the participant should be limited to 1, unless essential for protocol. The participant should only be accompanied by one caregiver if under 18 years of age.

On arrival:

a. Consider temperature screening of participants and caregivers for fever and symptoms of COVID-19 prior to entry into the facility.
b. Consider asking participants over 6 years of age and caregivers to wear a cloth face covering/mask and limit their movement in the facility.
c. All visitors should be asked to wash hands thoroughly before and after entry into the facility.

All team members should wear gloves which should be disposed of after each study participant.

Saliva sampling collection should be undertaken by the participant or caregiver (in the case of an infant or child only if the caregiver is comfortable with the procedure).

Team members should wear a surgical mask or cloth face covering during contact with participants for saliva sampling.

Whenever possible during the appointment, at least a 1 metre distance should be kept between the researcher/team member and participant.

After participants leave, clean all surfaces using EPA-registered disinfectants (if disinfectants are not available, use soap (detergent) and water) —this includes counters, beds, and seating.

Sample handling and analysis

All protective wear and usual high standards of care should be upheld when collecting, handling and analysing biological samples.