

# Rosenthal: Inside the updated health and safety protocols for the 2021 MLB season



By Ken Rosenthal (/author/ken-rosenthal/) 7h ago

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The health and safety protocols agreed upon by Major League Baseball and Major League Baseball Players Association on Monday night are similar to what they were during the 2020 season, but with a few twists.

Players, similar to their counterparts in the NFL and NBA, will wear sensors (<https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/21/nfl-nba-to-use-safezone-tags-for-coronavirus-contact-tracing.html>) enabling clubs to monitor social distancing and conduct contact tracing if an individual tests positive. And, unlike last season, the first played during the COVID-19 pandemic, they will be subject to potential discipline for violating the protocols, including suspensions or forfeiture of salary if they miss time.

Many of the changes the league and union adopted for the 60-game season in 2020, including seven-inning doubleheaders and a new extra-inning rule will remain in effect. The updated protocols, a copy of which was obtained by *The Athletic*, reflect all the league and union learned, as well as what they gleaned from other professional sports leagues. As was the case last season, they are subject to adjustment – and potential relaxation – depending upon what circumstances dictate and how the pandemic evolves.

The following are highlights from the protocols, in most cases quoted directly. “Covered individuals” is the term used for those covered by the plan – players, other on-field personnel (managers, coaches, umpires, etc.), and a limited number of essential staff who must come in close proximity to players.

## **Medical and testing protocols**

- Prior to reporting for spring training, covered individuals and any other members of their household must conduct a five-day at-home quarantine. Players already residing close to the spring-training site may use outdoor areas at the facility during this time, with club permission.
- Covered individuals are encouraged to obtain a PCR test for COVID-19 from a local testing provider in the week prior to traveling for spring training, and should not travel to the club’s site if the result of their test is positive.
- Upon arriving at spring training, covered individuals must undergo an intake screening consisting of at least a temperature check, PCR test and rapid antibody test.
- Testing will continue at least every other day through spring training, the regular season and, if necessary, the postseason.
- MLB, in conjunction with clubs, will offer free PCR and antibody testing for those who live in the same household as covered individuals on at least a weekly basis when the club is home. Clubs are strongly encouraged to offer testing to such household members while the team is on the road so that results are returned prior to the club’s return to the home city.
- To facilitate contact tracing, every covered individual must wear a Kinexon contact tracing device at all times while in club facilities and during club directed travel and while engaged in team activities, including group workouts and practices.

Repeated failure to wear the devices or repeated failure to return the devices to the Kinexon device docking station may be a basis for discipline. Any player data or information collected from a Kinexon contact tracing device, either directly or indirectly, shall be used only to determine close contact exposures under this provision, may not be shared with or used by the club, the Commissioner's Office, or any third party for any other purpose, and may not be used to discipline a player.

- During the 2021 season (including spring training and the postseason), covered individuals may not attend or enter any of the following events or establishments (and should discourage any other members of their household from the same):

- Indoor gatherings of ten or more people.

- Indoor restaurants or dining areas.

- Bars, lounges, clubs or like establishments.

- Fitness and wellness centers not affiliated with the club or MLB. Players also must not invite personal trainers into their home or see them on the road.

- Entertainment venues.

- Gaming and other venues, including bowling alleys, arcades, casinos and pool halls.

- In addition, members of the team traveling party on the road are not permitted to leave the hotel other than for team activities at the team facility or ballpark, for medical reasons, to travel with the team, for outdoor walks/exercise, for other low-risk outdoor activities, or in extraordinary circumstances.

While on the road, members of the traveling party will be permitted to eat outdoors at off-site restaurants (but not bars, lounges, clubs, casinos or like environments) that are walking distance from the team hotel or are accessed via transportation that is arranged or approved by the club and complies with other protocols, subject to continued approval from MLB and the MLBPA.

- Covered individuals may not meet with any guests or persons who are not part of the traveling party, whether at the team hotel, in their individual hotel room, or elsewhere. They will be permitted to meet outdoors with household or family members in the vicinity of the

team hotel or in private or semi-private outdoor spaces at a team hotel.

- Each club may create its own club-specific off-field Code of Conduct to supplement (but not detract from) the agreed-upon protocols, subject to MLB and MLBPA approval.
- Any covered individuals who are found to have violated the code of conduct, or a club-specific off-field code of conduct, are subject to potential discipline, including but not limited to suspension or forfeiture of salary for days spent away from the club while in mandatory self-isolation or quarantine resulting from the violation, subject to the just cause provisions of the collective-bargaining agreement.
- Clubs are also subject to discipline for violations of the protocols by players or staff.
- All personnel must wear a face covering and, where appropriate, additional PPE at all times when in Club facilities.
- MLB and MLBPA will work with public health authorities on issues related to the availability and timing of vaccinations for players, staff and other individuals subject to these protocols. An individual can receive an FDA-authorized or approved COVID-19 vaccination on his or her own if otherwise eligible under applicable laws or regulations.
- Vaccination for COVID-19 will be voluntary for all players. However, MLB and the MLBPA will strongly encourage players to undergo vaccination at the appropriate time.

## **Spring training**

- The total number of players that may be invited to spring training for each club is subject to approval by MLB, but no club may invite or accommodate more than 75 players and 75 staff at their complex(es). Despite these limits, clubs should continue to utilize all available space and facilities at their spring-training locations to prevent overcrowding and allow for enhanced physical distancing, where possible.
- Covered individuals and any members of their spring training household must quarantine at home throughout the duration of spring training, with the following exceptions:
  - For club-directed baseball activities at club facilities, or to travel with the team;
  - To engage in individual physical activity outside (e.g., walking, jogging);

- To participate in other outdoor physical activities (e.g., golf) where government or industry guidelines on COVID-19 safety and prevention are being followed;
- To perform essential activities (e.g., purchasing groceries, take-out meals, medicine, or other necessary supplies; obtaining medical care);
- Outdoor dining (but not at a bar, lounge, club, casino or like establishment), effective March 1, subject to continued approval from the MLB and MLBPA.
- For children, to attend school, organized extracurricular activities, and for household members unaffiliated with MLB, to attend work;
- In extraordinary circumstances such as the birth of a child or documented severe illness or death in the family.
- Spring training will be divided into three phases, beginning with individual and small group workouts (Phase 1), followed by larger or full-team workouts (Phase 2), and concluding with a limited number of spring training games against other clubs (Phase 3).
  - Phase 1 shall cover the period from when the first players report to spring training until Feb. 20. Clubs must begin spring training with individual or small-group workouts. Players should be divided into smaller groups (eight players or fewer), and assigned times and areas of the complex.
  - During Phase 2, which should last from Feb. 21 through Feb. 26, team workouts should still be broken down into smaller workout groups whenever possible, and workout groups should be staggered by assigning times throughout the day. However, larger group workouts and intra-squad games are permitted in this phase.
  - Phase 3 will include exhibition games between clubs, beginning on Feb. 27 or 28. Games that occur from Feb. 27 (or 28) through March 13 may be shortened to seven-inning games or five-inning games upon mutual agreement of both managers. Games that occur on or after March 14 shall be nine-inning games (and, upon mutual agreement of both managers, can be shortened to seven-inning games).

## **Potential rescheduling**

- MLB has the right during the regular season to relocate club(s) to neutral sites, spring training sites, or other clubs' home ballparks, and/or reschedule games contained in the 2021 championship season schedule, if necessary, for health/safety reasons, to comply with governmental restrictions, or to complete the schedule.
- With the consent of the MLBPA (which shall not be unreasonably withheld), MLB also has the right to conduct some or all of the 2021 postseason in neutral sites (including other clubs' home ballparks), or to delay the start of the postseason in order to reschedule championship season games following the completion of the championship season.
- MLB shall have the right to reschedule any game postponed due to COVID-19 as a seven-inning split or straight doubleheader. Each club's first four games rescheduled due to COVID-19 as a seven-inning split doubleheader shall not count against the limitation on split doubleheaders in the CBA.
- MLB intends to postpone games only if necessary to protect the health and safety of club personnel, players and umpires. Games will not be postponed for competitive reasons provided the club has a sufficient number of players available on its taxi squad or at its Alternate Site to replace those players on the active roster who are unavailable to play as a result of COVID-19.
- If the Commissioner determines that it is safe to play a scheduled game, and the Players Association or individual players disagree with that determination, the Joint Committee will make the final determination whether it is safe to stage the game. If a Club refuses to participate in a game which the Joint Committee determines should proceed, the Club shall forfeit the game.
- Use of any communal video terminals is prohibited. During games, players will have access to tablets under the Dugout iPad program that can be loaded with content before and after games, and will have access to in-game video in a format that cannot be used to steal the catcher's signs.
- Media and broadcast regulations for 2021 spring training and the regular season will be distributed to clubs (with a copy to the MLBPA) prior to the start of spring training. Unless and until MLB and the MLBPA agree it is safe to proceed otherwise, media members will not be permitted to access restricted areas or to be in close physical proximity to any uniformed personnel.

- The parties will discuss in good faith potential additional health and safety protocols for or during the 2021 postseason (such as further restricting the personal activities of players and staff when away from club facilities by instituting quarantine or “bubble” protocols) if the Commissioner determines, after consultation with recognized medical experts, that there is a material change in circumstances such that it poses an unreasonable health and safety risk to players or staff to continue to stage those games without implementing such procedures. However, the MLBPA’s consent is required for any modifications to the existing health and safety protocols for the 2021 postseason.

## **Playing rules**

- For spring training games that occur between Feb. 27 or 28 through March 13, the “retiring the side” rule will be relaxed. Defensive managers may end an inning prior to three outs following any completed plate appearance, provided the pitcher has thrown at least 20 pitches.
- Substitution rules in spring training shall be relaxed, allowing for re-entry for all pitchers.
- In the regular season, doubleheaders will consist of two seven-inning games. The extra-inning rule introduced last season also will continue to be in effect. Each half-inning following the ninth inning will begin with a runner on second base.
- All on-field personnel, including players, must wear face coverings appropriately (i.e., fully covering the nose and mouth) at all times in the dugout and bullpen (except for pitchers and catchers warming up in the bullpen). Players who violate this requirement (for example, by wearing a face covering below their nose or mouth) are subject to discipline by MLB or their club in the following respect:
  - First violation: A written warning shall be issued.
  - Second violation: A second written warning shall be issued.
  - Third and subsequent violations: A fine shall be issued for any third or subsequent violation in the amount of \$150 per violation.
  - Flagrant violations: Discipline for just cause may be imposed at levels different from the levels reflected above for any flagrant or habitual violations (e.g., prolonged arguing in close proximity with an umpire without wearing a mask) of the above face covering requirement.

## Rosters and transactions

- By 4:00 PM ET on Feb. 12, each club must submit to MLB a list of no more than 75 total players for spring training. By 12:00 PM ET on Opening Day, each club must submit a 26-player Opening Day roster, as well as a list of up to 28 players that will be assigned either to the Class AAA affiliate or Alternate Training Site. Any player on a major-league Injured List who does not remain with the club also will be assigned to the Alternate Training Site but will not count against the 28-player maximum.
- The limitations on the number of pitchers on the active roster and the restriction on position players pitching shall not apply. The roster size will expand to 28 on Sept. 1. On and after that date, a club may expand its 28-man roster to 29 for any split or regular doubleheader.
- A club is permitted to carry up to five additional players, including at least one catcher, on all road trips as a major-league taxi squad. Players on the taxi squad will not receive major-league service and will be paid at the minor-league rate, but will be entitled to major-league allowances of \$110 per day while the club is on the road, regardless of whether the club provides meals. They are permitted to work out with the major-league club, but not permitted to be in uniform and in the dugout during games.
- Where possible on the road, hotels must reserve a sufficient number of rooms for members of the traveling party on lower floors such that stairs, and not elevators, can be used for leaving and returning to rooms. Rooming blocks should ensure that the traveling party is isolated in the hotel, which should not book other visitors on the same floors that are reserved for the club.
- Hotels must provide a dedicated dining area in a private location of the hotel (e.g., conference room, lounge, etc.) for use by members of the traveling party. The traveling party is not permitted to leave the hotel to eat or otherwise use any restaurants (in the hotel or otherwise) open to the public, except for outdoor/curbside pickup of food or beverage.

*(Photo: Alex Trautwig / MLB via Getty Images)*

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