



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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DODE encourages students, families to practice safety ahead of holiday gatherings

The end of the calendar year is fast approaching, and it brings with it the Christmas and New Year's holidays. While we were told to remain apart for our celebrations last year, this year we are able to gather safely due to the guidelines issued by the Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice President (OPVP) and the Navajo Department of Health (NDOH).

We have a greater set of tools for defense against COVID-19 this year, including the mask ordinances on the Navajo Nation, more readily available COVID-19 testing, and three different COVID-19 vaccines to receive at health units across the Navajo Nation.

However, the Department of Diné Education (DODE) continually works with OPVP and NDOH to encourage students, families, and communities to remain vigilant and safe. The rise of the new Omicron variant and increased transmission rates have made headlines lately, both of which can put people at increased risk for contracting COVID-19.

Several key questions are likely on the minds of students and families ahead of the holidays, which were asked and addressed by NDOH below:

- **Are we able to gather with our families and colleagues for meals and celebrations this year?**
YES! – Current Public Health Emergency Orders and Executive Orders allow for gatherings of up to 15 people in the same space. This can include family gatherings, which provide a valuable and welcome opportunity to reconnect with those we were not able to see last year.

However, this comes with some caveats. If each member of the gathering is fully vaccinated, they can gather safely in an indoor venue. If there is a mix of vaccinated and unvaccinated persons in a gathering, try to limit the size of the gathering and hold it in an open setting. Consider having testing done for those unvaccinated persons ahead of the gathering as well.

Your gathering plans should be flexible in case there is a spike in the transmission rate or you do not feel comfortable with the risk factor of the gathering. Also remember to be respectful towards those who may have lost loved ones to COVID-19 in the past year.

- **What can we serve at our gatherings?**
Self-serve or communal plates and bowls of food are not advised at this time due to the high rate of germ sharing that could occur. The plates, bowls, and serving utensils associated with these dishes also pose that potential threat.

In their place, hosts are asked to consider foods that can be picked up via an attached toothpick or in a matter that reduces the likelihood of contact between different people. Having the food prepared and served in individual trays and distributed at the gathering could also be an option in larger settings.

In any setting with food, it is imperative that guests continue to follow the hygiene guidelines that have been in place since last year. This includes washing your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds after touching anything that could be dirty. Other tips include using a hand sanitizer that is at least 60% alcohol, using disinfectant wipes to clean surfaces, and providing disposable gloves and masks to guests who need them.

- **Can I participate in holiday shopping?**

YES! – But remember that store capacity can be limited up to 50% of its maximum due to the current Orange Status of the Navajo Nation’s reopening.

Also remember these capacity limits may not apply to shops off the Navajo Nation. This could lead to crowded environments that may lack sufficient ventilation or space to navigate. In these instances, it is important to continue to wear a well-fitting face mask and to practice social distancing when possible. Then remember to clean and sanitize your hands after being in a public space where you may have touched any surface.

- **What are some other general safety tips I should follow this holiday season?**

The CDC’s most recent safe gathering guidelines are a good, quick reference:

- If you are not vaccinated, consider receiving a vaccine as soon as possible. Persons over the age of 5 can receive one of the approved vaccines for no cost at their local health unit. To view the Navajo Nation vaccine schedule, visit <https://www.ndoh.navajo-nsn.gov/COVID-19/COVID-19-Vaccine>.
- If you are not fully vaccinated or are in a space where there may be unvaccinated persons, continue to wear a face covering or mask. The covering should fit well and cover both your mouth and nose.
- If you are able to socially distance yourself in public or stand at least six feet away from anyone at a given moment, try to do so.
- Wash your hands often! This cannot be overstated.
- If you feel sick, stay home and avoid traveling. If your symptoms persist and you feel you may have contracted COVID-19, get tested immediately. The current COVID-19 testing schedule can be viewed at <https://www.ndoh.navajo-nsn.gov/COVID-19/COVID-19-Testing>.
- The full CDC safety guidelines can be viewed at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/going-out.html>.

We understand our students, staff, and families are eager to gather to celebrate the holiday season, but it is important we do so safely. We can take extra steps to protect ourselves and those around us, which will allow us to have happy gatherings to cap off this year and then welcome a new year.

For a full viewing of the Navajo Nation’s COVID-19 safety guidelines and more information, visit <https://www.ndoh.navajo-nsn.gov/COVID-19>.

For the latest updates from the Navajo Nation Department of Diné Education, visit <http://www.navajonationdode.org/> and follow us on Facebook and Twitter.