

# CDC, NFL say league helped refine the meaning of a contact at high risk for coronavirus

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New York Daily News

Jan 25, 2021 at 6:09 PM

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The CDC and NFL have co-authored a scientific paper that credits the league with a revised understanding of what constitutes a high-risk close contact to a COVID-19 positive individual.

The paper, [made public on Monday](#), says that the NFL observed transmission of coronavirus even when people had spent less than 15 minutes of cumulative time together in close quarters.

Essentially, the NFL's experience illustrated that a specific duration or time threshold does not define a high-risk contact. It is one of many variables, including mask use, ventilation, and proximity of interaction that can produce varying rates of transmission.

The report also detailed that the NFL's intensive protocols in response to their early season findings "decreased within-facility exposures despite increasing community transmission of COVID-19 across the country during this time."

The CDC's website still specifies close contacts in its contact tracing

practices as necessary for “any individual within 6 feet of an infected person for a total of 15 minutes or more.” But football found, per this report, that there is no blanket 15-minute threshold under which someone would be guaranteed not to contract the virus.

As evidence, the report cites a group of 41 cases studied between Sept. 27-Oct. 10 in which 21 were believed “to have resulted from within-club transmission at a single club, requiring closure of that club’s facilities.”

The NFL had the benefit of wearable proximity devices to track individuals’ movement and proximity in facilities.

“Subsequent contact tracing identified multiple instances of transmission that likely occurred during <15 minutes of cumulative interaction within 1.8 meters [6 feet],” the report says. “Among the 21 persons with suspected within-club transmission, 12 had no device-recorded interactions of [15 minutes or more] with a person with confirmed COVID-19, including eight who had no interactions >5 minutes and seven who had no interactions >15 cumulative minutes per day.”

The report says that “interviews revealed that, among the brief interactions that did occur, some were during unmasked meetings in small rooms or while eating. Persons who contracted COVID-19 within this single-club transmission group received negative test results for several days after exposure before receiving a positive result.”

Monday’s paper, published in the CDC’s Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, was titled “Implementation and Evolution of Mitigation Measures, Testing, and Contact Tracing in the National Football

League, August 9–November 21, 2020.”

The report argued that the NFL set a good example of contact tracing strategies and intensive protocols for “essential workplaces, long-term care facilities and schools” — though it allowed that the NFL’s protocols were “resource-intensive.”

In other words, the NFL could afford the technology and costs. Many businesses and bureaucracies, including more essential ones, can’t.

The report interestingly spells out that the NFL’s mandatory minimum quarantine for high-risk contacts, at five days, was shorter than the CDC’s recommended quarantine of 10 days (or seven days “when diagnostic testing resources are sufficient and available.”)

But the report insists that “this was deemed acceptable because daily testing with <24-hour turnaround was available,” essentially meaning the NFL’s testing resources allowed the league to remove high-risk contacts earlier from quarantine.

At least seven contacts received positive test results after their release from the shortened five-day quarantine, the report says, but it says they continued to adhere to strict mitigation measures and there was no secondary internal transmission identified in those cases.

The CDC-NFL report only tells one side of a complex and still untold story, of course.

The league had outbreaks with teams like the Tennessee Titans and Baltimore Ravens. The NFL only needed to intensify its protocols because they weren’t strong enough to begin with.

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The league was inconsistent in enforcing its protocols and levying penalties for violating them. Tom Brady has flaunted the NFL's mask-wearing rules all season, for example, including in Sunday's on-field postgame celebration, as seemingly the only Buccaneer player, coach or staffer, screaming and breathing in the faces of his teammates and colleagues.

The league has fined some teams like the Saints for dancing without masks in locker rooms but turned a blind eye to other obvious violations.

And it's worrisome that the NFL was allowed a shorter quarantine for high-risk close contacts than recommended by the CDC.

Jeff Miller, the NFL's executive VP of health and safety initiatives, was also named the league's new executive VP of communications, public affairs and policy last May in the middle of the pandemic.

Prior to joining the league, Miller spent a decade on Capitol Hill as chief counsel for a Senate subcommittee on monopolies. He left government to open the NFL's Washington office, leading the league's lobbying operations.

Miller is named on Monday's CDC-NFL joint report as part of the NFL's

COVID-19 advisory and operational team along with Dawn Aponte, the NFL's Chief Football Administrative Officer.

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