

Covid Guidance: Library & Archival Collections

Like other libraries and archives, Echo was faced with closures of physical locations due to COVID-19 shutdowns while continuing to provide virtual services. As reopenings begin, we are all contending with the current reality. This paper compiles the latest thinking on planning for returning to work in the age of COVID-19 and, more specifically, handling library and archival collections. It is informational only and libraries and archives should exercise their discretion in using any of these recommendations. COVID-19 is a moving target, so this captures a snapshot of this moment in time and the subject must be revisited regularly as we go forward. But unlike last year when this all started, [vaccines are here](#) and we have some guidance and examples on how to approach reopening safely.

Overview

As businesses reopen, the promotion of effective health and safety practices will be paramount to returning employees and customers. Complicating matters: the shifting nature of infections (including new variants) and the number of federal, state, and local regulatory bodies responsible for imposing and enforcing laws and declarations. In general, the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) is a primary resource on dealing with COVID-19 in the U.S., for businesses and otherwise.

When it comes to library and archival collections, [REOpening Archives, Libraries, and Museums \(REALM\)](#) is a research project conducted by [OCLC](#), the [Institute of Museum and Library Services \(IMLS\)](#), [Battelle](#), and [other contributors](#) to produce science-based information about how materials can be handled to mitigate COVID-19 exposure to staff and visitors. With its research, REALM's [goal](#) has been to provide a guide for libraries and museums in reopening swiftly.

Notably, what we know about how the virus is spread has evolved since COVID-19 came to be. [CDC guidance](#) states that infections occur mainly through exposure to respiratory droplets when a person is in close contact with someone who has the virus. Touching surfaces is not thought to be a common way that COVID-19 is spread.

The bottom line: As vaccinations ramp up, protecting people continues to be top of mind. As [IMLS director](#) Crosby Kemper explained in May 2020, "we have to help [people] feel safe and to help libraries and museums make their buildings and collections safe."

Summary: CDC & Government Guidance

The CDC's [Guidance for Businesses and Employers Responding to COVID-19](#) (updated December 31, 2020) is a primary reference source. These guidelines are supplemented by OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Organization) in their [guidance on protecting workers](#) and are widely cited by the news media. State health departments and local officials adopt and enforce these guidelines.

The [CDC advises](#) that before resuming business operations, it is important to consider current levels of virus transmission, healthcare capacity at the state or local level, and workplace readiness to protect the safety and health of employees and the public. A phased approach is recommended. During all phases of reopening, employers should [implement strategies](#) for [basic hygiene](#), social distancing, identification and isolation of sick employees, workplace controls and flexibilities, and employee training that are appropriate for the particular phase.

Summary: Library & Archival Guidance

Libraries and archives have faced a unique set of circumstances upon reopening. Most examples so far have focused on a phased approach, according to the [International Federation of Library Associations \(IFLA\)](#). The [King County Library System \(KCLS\)](#) in Washington State is an example of this. After worker and workplace [safety concerns](#), how to deal with collections of various types and the risk of infection through contact with materials that may carry coronavirus was a primary concern.

To address client and worker comfort levels, the [REALM](#) research project offers [guidance](#) for libraries and museums as they plan for reopening, which includes checklists and [toolkits](#). The partnership, which is also [supported by](#) the [American Library Association \(ALA\)](#) and [Special Libraries Association \(SLA\)](#), addresses known and emergent research questions. Although it “will likely not answer all the concerns around reopening, nor will it supersede community health guidance,” it is designed to be part of a larger, critical [effort to help](#). Washington State has provided Phase 2 and 3 COVID-19 [requirements for library services](#) through it’s [Healthy Washington – Roadmap to Recovery](#) plan.

Roundup of Guidelines

As many public and academic libraries move forward with plans, the guidelines here address reopening onsite work for libraries – in particular, special libraries – and are organized by general topic area. The primary sources today are the [CDC](#) (for general business guidance) and the [REALM](#) research partnership (for library and archive-related guidance). Recommendations can change over time so these sources should be revisited often.

Working onsite

To prepare for new requirements due to COVID-19, employers are advised to have a [plan in place](#) and a copy available at each site/facility that addresses a wide range of topics, is tailored to the workforce and workspace, and includes procedures for dealing with an employee who tests positive after the business reopens. Because of the uneasiness created by these uncertain times and to protect employees’ health, increased communication and a focus on morale are important for returning to work. To summarize the thinking on risks, [Dr. Erin Bromage](#), an Associate Professor of Biology at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, put it this way: “If you are sitting in a well ventilated space, with few people, the risk is low.”

The [CDC’s guidance](#) for resuming business encourages employers to develop and implement policies that include dealing with social distancing, wearing cloth face coverings, and conducting daily health checks. General considerations for businesses and employers **as of December 2020**:

- Conduct a thorough [hazard assessment](#) to determine the likelihood of workplace hazards and establish what type of [controls](#) are needed for specific job duties.
- Consider taking steps to [improve ventilation](#) in the building, based on local environmental conditions and ongoing community transmission in the area (note: some of these recommendations are based on [COVID-19 guidance](#) from the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE)). Consider using natural ventilation (i.e., opening windows if possible and safe to do so) to increase outdoor air dilution of indoor air when environmental conditions and building requirements allow.

- [KCLS](#) has upgraded the filters in their HVAC systems to a version that traps smaller air particles and droplets. In addition, the interior air is being replaced much more frequently throughout the day with fresh outside air.
- Provide [education and training materials](#) in the appropriate language and literacy level for all employees, like [fact sheets and posters](#).

Scheduling/Staff

As libraries have reopened, many are doing so for [reduced hours](#) every day. The [CDC](#) advises establishing policies and practices for [social distancing](#) in the workplace:

- Rethink desks, displays, and workspaces to create more distance.
- Implement flexible work hours (e.g., rotate or stagger shifts to limit the number of employees in the workplace at the same time).
- Limit in-person meetings to a small number of attendees and only hold them as needed.
- Close or manage breakrooms to limit the number of people who gather at one time.
- Shift primary shelving activities to off-peak or after hours, when possible.
- Discourage workers from using each other's work tools and equipment, when possible.
- Place signs or use [announcements](#) to remind workers to maintain social distance and advise people not to enter if they've had COVID-19 symptoms or have been in contact with someone who has been infected.

Businesses are advised by the [CDC](#) to give employees, customers, and visitors what they need to clean their hands and cover their coughs and sneezes; CDC's [coughing and sneezing etiquette](#) and [clean hands webpage](#) provides more information):

- Provide tissues and no-touch trash cans.
- Provide soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer that is at least 60% alcohol. Ideally, place touchless hand sanitizer stations in multiple locations to encourage hand hygiene.
- Place [posters](#) that encourage [hand hygiene](#) at the entrance and in other likely to be seen areas. This should include signs for non-English speakers, as needed.
- Discourage handshaking. Encourage other noncontact greeting methods.

For employees who commute to work using public transportation or ride sharing, the [CDC](#) advises businesses to consider offering the following support:

- Provide employee incentives to use forms of transportation that minimize close contact with others, such as reimbursement for parking or single-occupancy ride shares.
- Allow employees to shift their hours so they can commute during less busy times.
- Ask employees to clean their hands as soon as possible after their trip.

[CDC guidance](#) recommends that employers consider conducting daily in-person or virtual [health checks](#) (e.g., symptom and/or temperature screening) of employees before they enter a facility, in accordance with state and local public health authorities and in a way that helps maintain social distancing guidelines. The [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission \(EEOC\)](#) has stated it is permissible for employers to measure the temperatures of employees and ask questions about symptoms (or require self-reporting) of all those entering the workplace. At the same time, employers must remain aware that federal privacy protections are still in place.

The [CDC](#) advises businesses to identify a workplace coordinator who will be responsible for COVID-19 issues and their impact at the workplace and that employees be cross-trained to perform essential functions so the workplace can operate even if key employees are absent.

PPE, Face Coverings, Gloves

PPE (such as gloves) and face coverings should be provided to workers if required by the state or if workers request it. [EHS Today](#) writes that it is recommended employers develop policies that answer the **who, what, when, where, why, and how** of PPE usage, including how the business will:

- Obtain the necessary equipment in a timely manner.
- Train workers to use the equipment effectively and safely.
- Clean and store the equipment.
- Manage workers who cannot or don't want to comply.

The [CDC](#) encourages employees to wear [well fitting](#) face coverings in the workplace as a measure to contain the wearer's respiratory droplets and help protect co-workers and members of the public. [Doubling up](#) masks is suggested as an option to help better fit. Cloth face coverings are *not* considered PPE and wearing a cloth face covering does not replace the need to practice social distancing. Regarding workers who don't want to comply, [OSHA](#) very generally put it this way: "Provide a face mask, if feasible and available, and ask the person to wear it, if tolerated." For more information, see [CDC guidance on how to safely wear and take off a cloth face covering](#). The CDC is not advising gloves to be worn at work except when cleaning/disinfecting.

Disinfecting shared spaces, workstations

Since catching the coronavirus from a contaminated surface is still considered a possibility, the [CDC](#) advises businesses and employers to routinely clean or disinfect frequently touched surfaces. To disinfect, use products appropriate for the surface that [meet EPA's criteria for use against SARS-CoV-2](#) (the list is updated often). Specific guidance from the CDC on [cleaning and disinfecting](#) a facility dated January 2021 includes:

- Wear disposable gloves to clean and disinfect.
- Start with soap and water, then use disinfectant. Cleaning with soap and water reduces number of germs, dirt, and impurities on the surface. Disinfecting kills germs on surfaces.
- To disinfect, follow the instructions on the label to ensure safe and effective use of the product. Many products recommend keeping the surface wet for a period of time.
- Diluted household bleach solutions may also be used if appropriate for the surface; alcohol solutions with at least 70% alcohol may also be used.

More frequent cleaning and disinfection may be required based on level of use, according to the [CDC](#). High touch surfaces include: Tables, doorknobs, handrails, light switches, countertops, handles, desks, phones, etc. For electronics, such as computers, computer accessories, keyboards, touchscreens, tablets, etc.:

- Consider putting on a wipeable cover.
- Follow manufacturer's instruction for cleaning and disinfecting.
- If no guidance, use alcohol-based wipes or sprays containing at least 70% alcohol. Dry surface thoroughly.

Further general cleaning tips for computers and electronics provided by [Yale Environmental Health & Safety](#):

- Do not use aerosol sprays, bleach, or abrasive cleaners.
- Use a lint-free cloth, such as a screen wipe or a cloth made from microfiber. Do not use fabric or leather surfaces as this can scratch or damage the items.
- Unplug all external power sources and cables.
- Avoid excessive wiping and submerging item in cleanser to avoid damage.
- Ensure moisture does not get into any openings. Never spray cleaner directly on an item.
- Gently and carefully wipe the hard, nonporous surface of the item.
- When using a disinfectant wipe, it is important to follow the contact time found on the label. It may be necessary to use more than one wipe to keep the surface wet for the recommended contact time.

If an employee tests positive for COVID-19, additional cleaning and disinfection is not necessary if it has been *more than 7 days* since the ill employee visited or used the facility. If it has been *less than 7 days*, areas used for prolonged periods of time by that person should be closed off.

The [CDC recommends](#):

- Wait 24 hours before cleaning and disinfecting to minimize potential for other employees' exposure to respiratory droplets. If waiting 24 hours is not feasible, wait as long as possible.
- Clean and disinfect all areas used by the person who is sick, such as bathrooms, common areas, and shared electronic equipment. See [CDC's guidance for deep cleaning](#) for more information.
- Once an area has been appropriately disinfected, it can be opened for use. Workers without close contact with the person who is ill can return to work immediately after disinfection.

Handling library collections

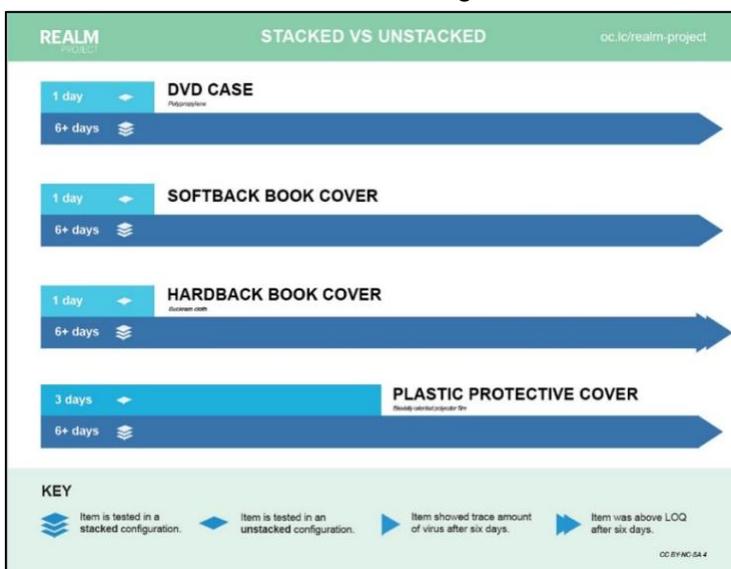
Guidance for handling collection materials has evolved due to the current consensus that surface contamination and fleeting encounters are [less of a worry](#) than close-up, person-to-person interactions for extended periods. According to the [IFLA](#), the general recommendation remains to take care – where there is a chance that a book or other piece of equipment has been in close contact with someone who is ill, it may be appropriate to wait or use safe cleaning practices.

Although several studies on how long the novel coronavirus lasts on different kinds of surfaces have generally determined the [risk of infection to be low](#) (these tests took place in laboratory conditions and infection risk falls over time), specific determinations on how to handle collections are just now starting to come together. The [ALA](#) says that allowing collections to remain untouched in quarantine is the recommended method of disinfecting library collection materials, however as the [Northeast Document Conservation Center \(NEDCC\)](#) reminds us, research results do not yet agree on the timeframes. The [REALM project](#)'s findings for eight phases of its research provides more specific direction regarding various types of common library materials and the effect of stacking/unstacking them and temperature:

- [Phase 1](#): Findings for tested materials – hardcover (buckram cloth) and softback books, plain paper pages inside a closed book, mylar protective book cover jackets, plastic DVD

cases – showed the SARS-CoV-2 virus undetectable after one day on the hardback and softback books and the DVD case, and after three days on the paper inside of a book and mylar book jackets.

- [Phase 2](#): After four days, the virus was undetectable on glossy book pages and showed a trace amount on magazine pages. These results indicate that a slightly longer quarantine time for some types of cellulose-based paper materials sitting in a stacked configuration may be required.
- [Phase 3](#): After five days in an unstacked configuration, the virus was not detected on the flexible storage bag or the DVD; the rigid plastic storage container and plexiglass showed detectable virus. This data suggests that a slightly longer quarantine time for these types of plastic-based materials may be required. Alternatively, based on the materials' nonporous nature, suitable liquid disinfection methods may promote a more rapid decontamination than quarantine.
- [Phase 4](#): [Phase 1](#) materials were tested but stacked to simulate storage in a book drop, bin, or on shelves. Expanded polyethylene foam, commonly used in museum exhibits, storage, and shipping, was tested unstacked in open air. After six days, the virus was still detected on all five materials, highlighting the effect of stacking and its ability to prolong the survivability of the virus. Longer quarantine time can be considered as other disinfection methods still warrant further investigation at this time.



- [Phase 5](#): Materials commonly used for bookbinding, upholstery, and crowd control were tested. After eight days, the virus was still detected on leather and synthetic leather materials. For polyolefin fabric and nylon webbing, only the amount of virus after the initial 1 hour of drying time could be measured. No data for the cotton fabric could be collected or reported.
- [Phase 6](#): Five materials commonly found in furnishings and exhibits were tested. After two days, the virus was no longer detectable on the brass and marble, and after six days, it was not detected on the glass, laminate, and powder-coated steel.
- [Phases 7 and 8](#): Test 7 materials were held at colder (34-36°F; 1-4°C) temperatures and Test 8 materials at warmer (83-84°F; 28-29°C) temperatures. For materials held at the colder temperature, attenuation rates were significantly slower compared to the warmer and ambient temperatures. This data may suggest that additional considerations may need to be evaluated regarding outdoor collection boxes, or storage in colder conditions.

The following is a sampling of additional current thinking from academic and public libraries on quarantine periods as of March 2021. The [ALA](#) recommends that libraries devise and standardize an approach to quarantine and collections handling that is suitable to their local context:

- The [NEDCC](#) refers to the [REALM project](#)'s findings as a source for consultation. They state that some institutions may opt for a 7-day quarantine, but also that "it is incumbent on each organization to understand how its collection materials are used and handled and to review research results for data that can guide its decisions about quarantine."
- Washington State's [guidance for library services](#) requires that returned items be sealed, stored, and quarantined for 24 hours before allowing them to return to active inventory for redistribution; [KCLS](#) quarantines for a minimum of 24 hours.
- [Yale Library](#) materials returned or handled by users will be quarantined for 48 hours. [NYU Libraries](#) quarantines library returns for 7 days.

A dedicated space or "[materials isolation zone](#)" is recommended for quarantined materials, while noting that the [REALM project](#)'s tests document that [stacking](#) collection materials can prolong the survivability of the virus. The [NEDCC](#) advises that if a dedicated space cannot be established, staff can place items in bags. It is not advisable to tightly seal the bags because this can create potentially-damaging microclimates. Materials should be labeled with dates of when those items entered quarantine and when they are safe to reshelve. Color-coding or grouping by material type may be useful here.

When it comes to using disinfectants on materials, the [ALA](#) recommends caution when using cleaning solvents on books and other potentially fragile library materials. The [NEDCC](#) advocates quarantining collection items over disinfecting them due to the damage that liquid disinfectants and powdered cleaners can cause. For additional collection safety, hand washing with soap and water is preferred over hand sanitizer because the former removes dirt and oils and the latter does not. Dirt and oils can transfer to collections and stain or damage them. This advice is based on a Library of Congress assessment on the [impact of hand sanitizers on collection materials](#) of various paper types.

Handling archival collections

While archival collections may not be directly at risk, the pandemic [complicates their care](#). Much of the guidance for handling library collections will apply to archival collections with some important additional points of consideration, most notably that historical materials can be [irreversibly damaged](#) by some cleaners. Currently, a primary source providing direction for archival collections is the [National Center for Preservation Technology and Training \(NCPTT\)](#). For those with specific questions, the NCPTT offers outreach services for consultations.

Isolation is the [NCPTT](#)'s preferred method to deal with museum objects and collections. Their recommendation is isolating buildings, sites, or collections for a **minimum of nine days**. Smaller items can be isolated by double-bagging them in zipper-style plastic bags labeled with object information, date, and reason for isolation, also for at least nine days. If faster access is required, the [Canadian Conservation Institute \(CCI\)](#) suggests isolation for 24 hours to allow aerosols to settle. [REALM project Phase 2](#) testing on archival folders showed that after two days of quarantine in a stacked configuration, the virus was not detectable.

If disinfection of non-heritage surfaces in collection spaces is [required](#), the [CCI](#) advises using methods that permit controlled application of cleaning solutions and disinfectants. The [NCPTT](#)

refers to [CDC](#) guidelines for disinfecting items but *with cautions*: bleach should *not* be used to clean and disinfect cultural materials and rubbing alcohol should *not* be used on wood as it can damage finishes. NCPTT advises other disinfectant methods that are both safe for cultural materials and effective at deactivating COVID-19:

- For cleaning natural and painted wood and metal surfaces in historic structures, make a soap and water mixture from Orvus or Ivory Liquid soap or other mild detergents in a spray bottle (not all dish soaps are appropriate because they have other additives that can leave a film).
 - Wet a paper towel with the solution and wipe the surface or railing. Follow with a damp paper towel of freshwater to remove any soap residue.
 - Limit the amount of water or wet cleaning.
- Bricks, ceramics, and stone can be wiped down with soap and water and disinfected with rubbing alcohol.
 - Apply rubbing alcohol to a paper towel, minimizing the amount of wetness applied to the surface. If surfaces are dirty, they should be cleaned using a detergent or soap and water prior to disinfection.
- It is recommended that artifacts in exhibit cases or in storage not be cleaned as the objects are already protected by the case.
- Taking on large-scale disinfecting actions for entire collections or museum spaces is not advised. Fogging with a germicide may lead to byproducts and result in chemical attack to cultural materials.
- For objects in storage areas, limiting access to only one person (consistently the same person) is suggested (if possible) at this time to avoid cross-contamination. This person should use the CDC recommended [handwashing protocols](#) and wear nitrile gloves.

Cleaner	Concentration	Materials
Isolation	None	All: 6-9 days Paper Books Small objects
Orvus or Ivory Liquid Soap	Dilute	Painted surfaces Metals Wood
2-propanol (rubbing Alcohol)	70%	Metals Stone

[NCPTT](#) does not currently recommend UV disinfection for COVID-19 as it can damage photographs and paper under long exposures.

Public Spaces

The [CDC](#) advises that common areas be closed or the number of people gathering in those areas be limited. Customers and workers are encouraged to wash their hands and use hand sanitizer frequently. Specific recommendations:

- Place signs or use announcements to remind customers to maintain social distance and advise people not to enter if they've had COVID-19 symptoms or have been in contact with someone who has been infected.
- Use signs, tape marks, or other visual cues such as decals or colored tape on the floor, placed six feet apart, to indicate where to stand when physical barriers are not possible.
- Adjust business practices to reduce close contact with customers, such as curbside pickup and delivery options, where feasible, or deliver services remotely.

Reopenings and other adaptations are continuing apace. Washington State's [guidelines for curbside library services](#) allow designated employees to deliver materials directly to patrons through curbside drop-off. An outdoor pickup area may be established provided that patrons and library staff maintain at least six feet of separation and all other hygiene and sanitation

protocols are followed. Libraries must use electronic or other ‘no contact’ methods to identify patrons, track borrowed materials, and handle returned items. Library staff must develop individualized library guidelines based on materials offered, library footprint, location, and curbside/parking options.

Slowly but surely, libraries and other businesses are reopening. As [examples](#) grow, the [REALM project](#) says that when creating reopening plans or revising protocols to meet current conditions, reviewing what other institutions are doing can be helpful. Many libraries are limiting numbers – some by [offering appointments](#) – in order to make it easier to maintain social distance. Further steps some are taking are to limit the number of sections of the library that are open, removing or rearranging furniture to ensure social distancing, or marking it as not for use. Throughout this, clear communication with users is important to ensure that they understand the rules in place. This includes library websites and outreach to users.



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Resources and Sources

[Guidance for Businesses and Employers to Plan and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)

CDC | Website

[Protecting Workers: Guidance on Mitigating and Preventing the Spread of COVID-19 in the Workplace](#)

OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Organization) | Guide | 2020

See also: [Guidance on Returning to Work](#), OSHA, 2020

[Reopening considerations for LAMs \(Libraries, Archives, and Museums\)](#)

REALM Project | Guide | February 2021

This document synthesizes reopening plans that have been generously shared by archives, libraries, and museums (LAMs).

See also: [Public Libraries Preparing to Reopen](#), REALM, June 25, 2020; [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Updates](#), Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)

[Handling Library Materials and Collections During a Pandemic](#)

American Library Association (ALA) | Website

[COVID-19 Resource Hub](#)

Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative | Collection

[COVID-19 and the Global Library Field](#)

IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) | Resource list | October 13, 2020

[What Employers Need to Do to Re-Open Post-COVID-19](#)

EHS Today [[U.S. magazine](#) for environmental, health and safety management professionals in the manufacturing, construction, and service sectors] | Article | David Sparkman | May 4, 2020

[Caring for Heritage Collections during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) | Technical Notes, [Webinar](#) | April 17, 2020; July 24, 2020

[Cultural Resources and COVID-19](#)

National Center for Preservation Technology and Training (NCPTT) | Blog post | Mary Striegel | April 6, 2020

[How to Sanitize Collections in a Pandemic](#)

American Libraries | Article | Lara Ewen | March 27, 2020

[Covid-19 Basics: Disinfecting Cultural Resources](#)

National Center for Preservation Technology and Training (NCPTT) | Webinar | Sean Clifford | March 25, 2020