

## Mental Health Lessons Learned from Tokyo 2020 COVID Isolation Care Team

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DENVER, CO — The human experience for athletes who tested positive for COVID-19 at last summer's Tokyo Olympics could have been improved with better attention to their physical and mental health while at their isolation hotel. That finding is according to a National Jewish Health led paper just published in the [British Journal of Sports Medicine](#). While the infection mitigation strategy was mostly successful, a health care team working at the COVID isolation hotel highlight lessons learned that could enhance an athlete's wellbeing at future events featuring COVID testing and isolation.



“In so many ways, last year’s Olympics were a huge success, but for the few athletes and staff that were isolated due to COVID, the experience was hugely disappointing and stressful,” said [Tod Olin, MD](#), lead author, and director of the Exercise and Performance Breathing Center at National Jewish Health, who was among the Games’ COVID care team last summer. “Not knowing how long COVID and emerging variants will be among us, we wanted to provide suggestions on how to better serve our Olympians, Paralympians and other isolated athletes away from home in the future. Now the challenges are more predictable. Fighting this pandemic is a team sport, and we want to be part of the solution.”

Less than 40 athletes tested positive for COVID-19 at the Summer Games held in 2021. Those that did spent up to 10 days in a modest hotel with few daily periods for socialization, no regular access to fresh air, and an absence of designated exercise space. The facility was configured to optimize infection control and enable medical care, but the COVID isolation care team suggests designing future isolation facilities with space and equipment that enable moderate physical activity and training, and individual outdoor access.

Communication was also a challenge. Hotel residents spoke numerous languages while the nursing team almost exclusively spoke Japanese. Translation devices could not convey the nuance of culture and were often inadequate for the relevant languages. In the future, the COVID isolation care team suggests retaining reliable and culturally-sensitive interpretation services to minimize future challenges.

Finally, they felt the approach to the mental health needs of those affected should be improved. Most of the Olympic and Paralympic dreams of those who had to isolate were destroyed, and their National Olympic or Paralympic Committees (NOC/NPC) had variable levels of support systems. Some were relatively unwilling to accept athletes back into residential areas of the Athlete’s Village after the isolation period. The COVID isolation care team suggests guidance to NOC/NPCs on ways to interact with isolated Games participants and centrally-organized mental health support services.

The summer games held in Tokyo were an unprecedented learning experience, though unlikely to be the last of its kind. The COVID isolation care team concludes that a focus on individual athlete wellbeing and the human experience should be incorporated into future event planning.

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## Media Contacts

Our team is available to arrange interviews, discuss events and story ideas.

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