



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN  
Animal Resources Center

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DATE: May 23, 2020  
TO: Researchers studying animals  
FROM: Glen Otto, DVM Director, Animal Resources Center  
RE: Preliminary information and context for Phase 3 of the research restart plan as it affects animal research.

Hello! This is the first of what will likely be a string of communications as things proceed, but since the restart plan was announced earlier this week, I wanted to provide some information on how this all will translate to those interested in restarting a portion of their animal research.

#### **A) Reference Information:**

The main source of restart guidance is the “Resuming Research Operations on Campus (Research Restart)” web page from the VP-Research, found here:

<https://research.utexas.edu/covid-19-research-faq/>

This page has links to a variety of documents, including:

- 1) The “UT Research Restart Plan and Phases” document which outlines the phased approach to resuming research operations
- 2) The “PI Research Restart Toolkit” document, a set of policies and best practices that outline how to resume research activities safely at The University of Texas at Austin.
- 3) “Research Restart FAQs”

#### **B) Background Information**

The Research Restart Plan document (#1) includes these concepts:

- Rather than starting all at once, the plan provides for stepwise increases in research activity and personnel density throughout the phases, with Phase 3 (the phase beginning in June) being the most limited of the phases planned.
- Although increasing research output is an important priority, the choices of which activities commence early vs. which will be held for a later phase have been made from a risk management standpoint
- Access to research spaces and priority for access will be governed by the Deans/Associate Deans of Research of the schools and colleges

- Logistical issues may affect supply chains and the availability of research materials
- Researchers should anticipate the possibility of returning to more restricted research phases, should COVID-19 new cases rise again.
- Significant restrictions on space occupancy are being placed on researchers performing research:
  - *Stay at least 6 feet (about 2 arms' length) from other people.*
  - *No more than one individual per 200 sq. ft. of laboratory or office space.*

### **C) Animal Research Specific Considerations**

The Research Restart Plan document (#1) has this to say about Animal Research:

“Prioritize animal experiments for which cessation will result in euthanasia or loss of a colony as well as studies for which additional data can be obtained by studying animals already present in animal facilities; Limited amount of breeding and new animal orders processed; Breeding and orders allowed only for animal experiments that require short-term housing (3-4 weeks); Procedures performed must minimize the need for prolonged face-to-face personnel interactions.”

It also reiterates that plans must accommodate the possibility of a “sudden return” to Phase 4 restrictions, similar to those instituted during the spring research shutdown.

### **D) What does this all mean?**

As research labs begin to start thing up again with only 30-40% of their personnel being allowed to return to campus, there will also be significant restrictions on animal populations (quantity) and the types of procedures that can be performed (quality). Although those people who had received research exemptions for the period before May 31 have gained some experience working within the significant social distancing requirements that are in place, this will be a new experience for all the additional people approved for work in this phase, and the increased population in the facilities will increase the complexity for everyone. We can't really predict where all the bottlenecks and areas of increased risk will pop up as animal-related activities start to come back online, so Phase 3 should be considered a “shake-down cruise” during which issues will be identified and solutions put in place during a period of low occupancy. Minimizing the increase in animal populations and focusing on short-term studies with simple procedures will also avoid generating or acquiring animals that could end up being unneeded if we have to pivot back to Phase 4 restrictions based on a worsening public health situation. The plan would be to increase animal allocations and broaden the types of work that can be done should conditions both internal and external to the campus allow progression to Phase 2 conditions.

Another consideration is that the ARC is a very interconnected group and social distancing can only be partially instituted in our work areas. Should an infection cluster affect our group, the initial response might leave 25-40% of the staff self-isolating until more granular evaluation and

clearance can take place. Because of this unfortunate possibility, we must not over-burden the facility with large numbers of animals in this first re-opening phase.

The degree that the space occupancy restrictions will affect the use of animal housing and procedure areas cannot be overstated. Many of these rooms are less than 200 square feet, which means multiple persons should not co-occupy the space and researchers will need to complete tasks one at a time... For this reason, the ARC will work to spread out the animal populations and make as many procedure rooms available as possible, but it is clear that following the guidelines will only be possible if there continues to be a reduced rodent population.

Most investigators should plan on an ability to increase their total animal cage census at least an additional 25% over their current (May) cage counts, with the possible exception of groups that have been maintaining close to their normal number of cages due to a shutdown exemption. Based on need and justification, some allocations above this level can be accommodated. For those laboratories that have very significantly reduced or inactivated their animal work for the research pause (...what is a 25% increase from zero?) the past history of animal populations prior to the shutdown can be used by the ADRs, with ARC consultation, to approve appropriate Phase 3 cage populations.

Note that this increase cannot all occur at once, because animal ordering and the receipt of new animals will need to be metered somewhat so the ARC staff are not overwhelmed. The increase can include additional breeding, but this should be focused on maintenance breeding for most labs, with production breeding only being appropriate for those labs that can utilize the resulting offspring in short-term studies.

The impact of the recently announced social distancing requirements are being evaluated in the context of the animal research spaces, and we will try to find user-friendly solutions to avoid conflicts. The shared SURGERY spaces that the ARC manages are already in an online calendar system. Currently, my expectation is that the ARC will work to put in place scheduling systems to allow online calendars to be created for the generic, shared PROCEDURE spaces in ARC-managed facilities, such as the necropsy rooms and procedure rooms that normally have sign-up sheets placed on the door. However, it is beyond our capability to coordinate a scheduling system for every shared HOUSING room across campus. I am asking the research groups who share particular housing rooms to identify their in-room neighbors and to reach out and form cooperative groups that can self-determine how to best schedule access to the rooms, hoods, etc. In these situations, ARC priority access to provide routine animal care (especially before 1PM) will need to be included in planning, as will any overarching principles regarding room or building occupancy.

**E) Additional items to note (current thinking, may be subject to change, watch for future communications)**

- As long as no humane or experimental issues are identified, operational changes that have been made for Phase 4 (current situation) will be continued as we enter Phase E. This includes some changes in the changing frequency of cages or cage components, but we will still meet regulatory requirements.

- The morning/afternoon priority shift arrangement for ARC staff and research personnel (ARC before 1PM, researchers after) must continue. It is understood that this won't always be possible based on individual study requirements, but it represents the establishment of a "shift" arrangement to foster social distancing and will continue to be an important consideration.
- As previously communicated, the general time for lights-on in the animal holding rooms will move from 7AM to 6:30 AM, allowing ARC staff to get an earlier start.
- All investigators using the animal facilities must wear a face covering anytime they are in the facility. ARC will NOT be providing these face coverings for most areas in the facility. A disposable or launderable mouth/nose covering that meets campus requirements and is maintained free of visible soiling will be acceptable. As per current practice, we will provide surgical masks or N95s only for specialized areas, such as the mouse barrier areas, ABSL-2 areas, and possibly for some surgical procedures.
- If there are any invasive studies (e.g. survival surgery) given special permission to begin during Phase 3, the ARC will require advance notice from researchers and will need to approve scheduling of those procedures where large animals are involved, or rodent studies relying on ARC anesthesia assistance.
- Researchers should limit the performance of studies that require groups (2 or more people) to be present at the same time for prolonged procedures, such as tissue harvest set up in assembly-line fashion. The guidance shared this week recommends that 5 minutes of close interaction between people should be considered significant in terms of social distancing and contact tracing.
- In person ARC training that normally requires close observation/interaction may not be available and alternative strategies will be considered
- Animal orders will be restricted during Phase 3 and only available with special approval based on the studies being performed. DO NOT enter animal orders into the online system until after you have received approval from the ARC Director.
- Non-commercial rodent imports from other academic institutions will be restricted during Phase 3 and only available with special approval based on the studies being performed.