



## **COVID-19 Outbreak Control and Prevention State Cell**

**Health & Family Welfare Department**

**Government of Kerala**

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### **Health Advisory on Sabarimala Pilgrimage in the context of COVID-19**

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Acceleration of COVID-19 transmission through religious gatherings have been observed in many places in Malaysia, India, Pakistan and South Korea. Transmission of COVID have been witnessed at Lord Venkateshwara Temple Tirupathi even after following strict COVID protocols. Many pilgrimages such as Kailash Yatra and Shri Amarnathji Yatra have been suspended this year. 2020 Hajj pilgrimage was scaled down considerably with participants restricting to 1000 people. Many superspreading events like transmission linked to Washington Choir were reported. All these highlight the need for strict COVID protocols during Sabarimala pilgrimage.

Huge number of pilgrims and other individuals- drivers, cleaners, cooks etc coming into state from within state and other states could further aggravate the progression of epidemic in Kerala and other parts of the country. Spill over transmission from pilgrims who acquire COVID during their long travel travel will also potentially add to the already escalating outbreak in other states. Also, Congregations at Nilakkal, Pampa, Sannidhanam could aggravate COVID transmission.

#### **COVID 19 transmission dynamics is closely related to the 3 Cs**

1. **CLOSED SPACES** with poor airflow.
2. **CROWDED PLACES.**
3. **CLOSE CONTACT settings** with face to face contact.

Religious congregations/pilgrimage had turned out to be hotbeds of COVID 19 transmission across the world because of the difficulty in observing the 3Cs . In order to ensure safe Sabarimala pilgrimage, we need to ensure that the number of pilgrims are restricted to a fixed number every day so that strict



adherence to 3Cs can be ensured and thereby prevent Sabarimala from becoming a hotbed for COVID 19 transmission.

1. To ensure strict compliance to all standard precautions, to maintain physical distancing while climbing uphill, to avoid superspreading events and to avoid close contacts among the pilgrims, restriction of number of pilgrims to a fixed number is important. The fixed number of pilgrims allowed per day is the CRITICAL NUMBER above which strict adherence to 3Cs become impossible. Exceeding the number shall lead to difficulty in observing standard precautions. Hence the number of pilgrims per day shall be restricted as per the relevant government instructions in this regard.
2. All pilgrims are advised to follow all safety precautions while travelling including frequent handwashing, maintaining physical distancing and use of facemasks. Pilgrims are advised to carry hand sanitisers with them.
3. Anybody who has been recently exposed to COVID-19 or who has any symptoms like fever, cough, respiratory symptoms, loss of smell, fatiguability are advised to restrain from the pilgrimage.
4. All pilgrims are advised to come with a COVID-19 negative certificate done 24 hours prior to reaching Nilakkal. Pilgrims can undergo test at cost from any approved STEP Kiosk run by Government or Private agencies which have been arranged at major public places and throughout the way to Sabarimala.
5. A negative rapid antigen test does not rule out COVID 19. So even if the test is negative, there shall not be any compromise in the standard precautions.
6. On arrival at Sabarimala, pilgrims are advised to wash/sanitise their hands at least every 30 minutes, maintain physical distancing of 6 feet where ever possible and wear face masks properly.
7. 10% of patients who have recovered from COVID 19 may be have lingering symptoms which may persist upto 3 weeks post recovery and 2% may have symptoms which persist for more than 3 months post recovery. Some of them may have exertional dyspnoea which might become apparent only during heavy exertion like in climbing the sabarimala hills. Exertional dyspnoea which become apparent only during heavy exertion could be due to subtle problems related to lung or heart. So it is advisable for all the recovered patients with COVID 19 having exertional dyspnoea to avoid climbing the hills. All the COVID 19 recovered patients shall undergo a graded exercise program and pulmonary rehabilitation program spread over weeks to ensure their physical fitness before embarking on pilgrimage to Sabarimala. As asymptomatic infections could also have occurred, it is advisable for all pilgrims [ irrespective of knowledge of past COVID 19] to undergo a



graded exercise program and pulmonary rehabilitation program spread over weeks to ensure their physical fitness before embarking on pilgrimage to Sabarimala. A pulmonology and cardiology fitness prior to pilgrimage for all persons is desirable.

8. Temporary stagnation of people at Nilakkal and Pampa to be avoided. Congregation of people can facilitate transmission. Temporary congregation of people shall not be allowed at any places. Toilets need to be disinfected after every use. The return journey to be planned in such a way that after climbing down, the pilgrims shall directly proceed to the head quarter halt places having independent toilet facilities.
9. Drivers, cleaners, cooks accompanying the pilgrims also shall follow all the advisories and standard precautions as mentioned above.

**Principal Secretary**