



How Do Climbing Gyms Reopen During a Pandemic?

The CWA and the Indoor Climbing Industry

The Climbing Wall Association (CWA) serves to support the growth, health, independence, and professionalism of the climbing wall industry. We represent the interests of more than 600 climbing facilities in the United States.

These businesses:

- Employ tens of thousands of Americans
- Are a crucial health, fitness, and wellness service for millions of customers
- Were set to be a billion-dollar industry in 2020 prior to the pandemic

The Purpose of This Position Paper

Our goal is to provide those working in public health information about the nature of the activities in a climbing gym, the history and culture of risk management in our industry, and the work that the CWA and many individual businesses have already done to identify and address new risks related to COVID-19.

Because of this culture, and the nature of our sport, climbing gyms do not present a unique or elevated risk when it comes to the transmission of COVID-19. As states, counties, and cities plan on phasing in or easing any restrictions in response to COVID-19, climbing gyms should be among the first businesses allowed to resume operations.

The Sport of Climbing and What Happens in a Climbing Gym

Climbing is a non-contact indoor sport where physical distancing in 3 dimensions is normal and contact between climbers is generally avoided at all times.

Climbing gyms contain climbing walls of various sizes and configurations. These are the primary arena for the sport of climbing. Designated routes are added to the walls by affixing hand and foot holds by which a climber may ascend the wall. These routes need to be available to participants over time as some routes may take days or weeks of practice to complete. Because of the nature of the sport, lack of access to these routes, or alteration to them, can impact the sport itself.

Routes of a certain height are protected with auto-belay devices or dynamic ropes that may be pre-hung or carried up the route by the climber. When a dynamic rope is used, a partner is required to control the rope and protect the climber – this individual is



referred to as the belayer. Tall routes like these cannot be climbed without a rope for protection.

Some climbing features are shorter and do not require roped protection. This activity is called bouldering, and padded floors are present to soften falls. This activity is distinct from roped climbing, requiring different skills and abilities.

Climbing gyms may offer fitness equipment, yoga, locker rooms, classes, and summer camps in addition to the core climbing features. Often, these services are used by participants to supplement and enhance their climbing practice.

Risk Management and Culture in a Climbing Gym

Risk management is a top priority for the indoor climbing industry. While the specific risks posed by COVID-19 are different from the intrinsic risks of climbing, the average climbing gym is better-positioned than many other businesses to address them. The processes of evaluating, documenting, mitigating, judging, and accepting risk are a daily activity for these businesses and their customers.

The indoor climbing industry has more than 30 years of experience operating commercial facilities and the CWA began publishing industry practices more than 15 years ago. Every climbing gym is well-practiced in educating customers and requiring compliance with their policies. The additional rules needed to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 can be added into overall risk management plans more easily than in many other industries.

What Reopening Looks Like for a Climbing Gym

When considering where to place a climbing gym in reopening timelines, it is useful to identify what aspects of indoor climbing pose the highest risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus:

- Prolonged physical contact between individuals or groups
- Direct transmission via respiratory droplets
- Large groups of people gathering together

While transmission from indirect transfer is still considered a possibility, and additional controls should be implemented, this transmission method is not seen by the [CDC](#) or [WHO](#) as the primary method of transmission and it can be mitigated with proper personal hygiene.

It is noteworthy that none of these risks are unique to the sport of climbing, but rather areas of caution necessary for all businesses and public spaces. Furthermore, climbing gyms are particularly well suited to mitigate these risks compared to many other businesses.

The [CWA recommends](#) that climbing gyms focus on four key areas when designing a reopening plan:

- Communication
 - Educate customers and staff about policies and expectations
- Hygiene
 - Both personal and respiratory hygiene are essential to mitigate risk
- Physical Distancing
 - Limit the risk of droplet transmission by disallowing groups and encouraging space
- Cleaning
 - Gyms should have an increased cleaning regimen in place

Of course, all gyms and businesses should follow all specific local regulations and guidelines as well. Beyond that, many gyms have chosen to adopt policies that go above and beyond published guidance. Individual or collective reopening guidelines should be considered by local health authorities.

Some examples of these superlative policies are:

- The large number of gyms who have opened with a maximum capacity far below that which is allowed by their local guidelines
- Gyms that have made physical changes to their facilities, climbing walls, and routes to make distancing easier
- Changes to customer education and communication strategies

When Should a Climbing Gym Reopen?

The unique ability of climbing gyms to educate and communicate with their customers, encourage physical distancing, and monitor risk make them prime candidates for early reopening phases. The health and wellness benefits to the climbers themselves should also be considered as an added benefit.

Ultimately, it is up to local health authorities to determine the appropriate time to reopen certain businesses, but climbing gyms can be placed in earlier phases as we have seen in many states such as Arkansas, Alabama, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Idaho,



Louisiana, Missouri, Nevada, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and West Virginia.

For more information or questions, please contact the Climbing Wall Association:

info@climbingwallindustry.org

<http://climbingwallindustry.org>

720-838-8284

6672 Gunpark Dr. Suite 101

Boulder, CO 80301