

Watching the Big Dance? 4 Ways to Celebrate March Madness Safely

Noah Fromson *March 29, 2021 2:53 PM*

An emergency medicine physician offers tips to slow the spread of COVID-19 and limit hospitalizations.



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In its return from a pandemic-forced hiatus, the NCAA tournament has not disappointed. Overtime games, buzzer-beating shots and underdog upsets are making up for all the madness fans missed last March.

Successful advancements by any team are often accompanied by some bedlam – packed sports bars, watch parties and, with a deep run, celebration in the streets. Despite an ongoing health emergency, fans will still make some concerning decisions, says an emergency physician from the Department of Emergency Medicine at Michigan Medicine.

“As happy as we are to see the teams making it as far as they are, we recognize that as people get together, there is an opportunity for COVID to spread,” says

Brad Uren, M.D., also an assistant professor of emergency medicine. “That’s really the last thing that we want to see this close to the finish line.”

Uren also notes that a surge in alcohol consumption, another issue during major sporting events, adds a layer of difficulty to containment.

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“We would prefer in the emergency department that we don’t see anybody coming to use our services as a result of overindulgence,” he says. “And frequently, the more alcohol we drink, the more we’re celebrating, maybe the less we’re thinking about all of the things that keep us safe.”

Here, Uren offers a few ways to celebrate your favorite teams during March Madness all while staying safe:

1. Know who is vaccinated.

In Michigan, all adults are eligible to receive the COVID vaccine on April 5. While vaccination is ramping up everywhere, there are still many people who have not received the shot yet.

The Centers for Disease Control guidance permits people who are vaccinated to gather with others who are also immunized without masks or social distancing.

“But we need to keep in mind that there’s going to be a lot of people, particularly some of the younger sports fans, that may not be eligible for the vaccine yet,” Uren says. “So, caution still needs to be taken.”

2. Stay vigilant about precautions.

For Michigan, the state is currently experiencing another COVID-19 spike. Recently, the daily case count surpassed 4,000; a number not seen since early January. Pushing aside pandemic fatigue, especially around unvaccinated people, is key, Uren says.

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“It’s important to maintain that social distancing and wear masks,” he says. “That’s really important at a time where people will be celebrating. They’ll be

eating, they'll be snacking, they'll be drinking some alcohol, perhaps. Those are things that involve taking off your mask."

3. Move outside if possible.

Anything to facilitate greater distancing is helpful, Uren says. Although fans still need to remain cautious wherever they are.

"Outdoors, there may be less concern about respiratory droplets and respiratory spread," Uren explains. "If going outside is something people can do, that may be helpful in allowing for more space or people to spread out and celebrate responsibly."

4. Remember this legendary football coach's speech.

During the 1983 football season, Michigan football coach, Bo Schembechler, gave a speech famously titled "The Team." He told his squad that "no man is more important than the team...the team, the team the team."

Michigan fan or not, Uren says Schembechler's words apply to all basketball fans as the world tries to end the pandemic.

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"We are all on the same team," Uren says. "If we remember that speech and work together and maintain these recommendations a little longer, I think we're going to have a great summer and a great time moving forward. But we just really need to remember we're all in this together and we're working together; we shouldn't criticize each other. Being responsible a little bit longer is going to get us through this."

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