

What You Need to Know about Social Distancing

As the situation around COVID-19 evolves, we've seen the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issue guidance about canceling or postponing in-person events. Entire sports seasons, thousands of schools, theaters, bars, restaurants and more have been shut down and we are all being asked to practice "social distancing".

Although this is confusing and even frightening, there is a public health reason for these measures. The goal of social distancing is to stop or slow down the spread of disease. By doing this, we avoid overwhelming the health care system and enable ill patients to get the care they need.

New research funded by the National Institute of Health (NIH) documents why social distancing may be our most effective method of slowing the spread of COVID-19. Here are a few highlights:

- For every confirmed case of COVID-19, there are likely another five to ten people with undetected infections.
- Although those with undetected infections are thought to be only about half as infectious as individuals with confirmed COVID-19, these undetected cases were so prevalent in China that they were the infection source for 86 percent of the confirmed cases.
- The spread of COVID-19 slowed considerably in China after the country established travel restrictions and social distancing.

What is Social Distancing?

Social distancing is deliberately increasing the physical space between people to avoid spreading illness. According to medical experts, staying at least six feet away from other people reduces the chances of catching COVID-19.

Examples of social distancing that allow you to avoid larger crowds or crowded spaces are:

- Working from home instead of at the office
- Closing schools or switching to online classes
- Visiting loved ones by electronic devices instead of in person
- Cancelling or postponing conferences and large meetings

What is Self-Quarantine?

People who have been exposed to coronavirus might practice self-quarantine, which health experts recommend should last 14 days. Two weeks are enough time to determine if they will become ill and contagious. This applies to individuals who have traveled to parts of the country or world where COVID-19 is spreading rapidly or have been exposed to infected people.

Self-quarantine involves:

- Using standard hygiene and washing hands frequently
- Not sharing things like towels and utensils
- Staying at home
- Not having visitors
- Staying at least six feet away from other people in their households

Once a quarantine period ends, if there are no symptoms, people can return to their normal routines (if advised they can by their doctors).

What is Isolation?

Isolation means keeping people who are infected away from those who are not infected. This can take place at home or at a hospital or care facility. Special personal protective equipment is used to care for these patients in healthcare settings.

What is Permitted in Social Distancing?

Can I go to a restaurant, food court or bar?

According to new guidelines, no—at least not for dining in. Instead, the CDC says it is okay to use drive-through, pick-up or delivery options. Back at home, food should be taken out of the containers (throw those out). Wash hands thoroughly before eating. An infection disease expert at Brigham and Women's Hospital says the food itself is probably not a major risk factor because the virus starts with the respiratory system versus the digestive track.

Can we visit the grandparents?

The federal government has asked visitors to stay away from nursing homes and retirement or long-term care facilities. The reason is that there is a large percentage of people who have no symptoms or very mild cases but can spread the coronavirus. That includes children. Older members of the population are at increased risk, so it is best to visit virtually and/or send care packages.

But I'm a healthy grownup, not a kid. Is it okay to visit my elderly relatives?

Older adults should stay at home with plenty of food, medication and supplies on hand. However, adult children should have back-up plans to care for older parents in case they get sick, since they're the ones at highest risk from the coronavirus. For the time being, don't visit older relatives unless it's necessary. Staying in touch regularly to prevent feelings of isolation is a positive step.

I still need to go to work. Is it okay to drop my kid off at daycare?

New CDC guidelines haven't yet tackled the issue of daycare, but the advice is to try to find a daycare setting with a small number of kids. Don't send children to daycare if they're sick and make sure they have gotten their flu shot (although this won't protect them specifically against coronavirus). Daycare providers should wipe down toys often with [disinfecting cleaners and wipes](#) (evidence suggests that the virus can live on surfaces like plastic for up to 72 hours).

Are kids' play dates okay?

Experts say play dates defeat the purpose of everyone staying at home. For example, elementary school-age kids get about five viral infections per season on average. If they're playing with three or four friends, each one could have, had or is getting over a viral illness that could be shared. And it's not just the coronavirus, but any virus that might cause a child to need medical attention that is a concern. Avoiding doctor visits should be a priority, where contamination from COVID-19 and other illnesses is possible.

Furthermore, symptoms of COVID-19 take an average of five days to show up from the time of infection and can still be contagious during that time. So, someone visiting can look fine but transmit the virus. You are also creating new possibilities for the type of transmission that we are trying to prevent with all the closures of schools, work and public events. Basically, you should not have your children in other people's homes or their kids in your house.

What about playing outside with other kids or going to the park?

If you do let your kids outside to play with others, make sure everyone keeps at least six feet of distance from each other (which can be very hard for younger children to follow). That's because the virus can be transmitted between [people who are in close contact with each other](#), making it a good idea to avoid playgrounds and other places where germs can accumulate.

What about adults having close friends over to visit?

It depends partially on where you live. If there's widespread transmission of the coronavirus in your community, the advice is to skip visitors altogether. But if you're in areas where there is less community spread, it might be reasonable to limit visits rather than eliminate them. It is also advisable to keep it to one friend at a time.

Can I travel—airfares are so cheap right now

It is almost impossible to stay at least six feet away from other people on an airplane. Even when driving to a destination, you end up spreading your germs in a differing area, which goes against the idea of sheltering at home to [flatten the curve](#). Instead, you should be minimizing contact with others outside your immediate household.

I had a doctor's visit scheduled months ago. Should I still go?

If it's a nonessential visit to a doctor or dentist, reschedule it. If you don't have to visit a doctor's office or a hospital for elective reasons, it's best to avoid them for now. Plus, by putting things off, you are freeing up hospital beds and space for those who need it more.

I need to go to the grocery store. How do I do that in a safe way?

This counts as an essential trip but try going during off-peak hours when it's less crowded. Wipe down the handles on the shopping cart or basket. Be careful not to touch your face with your hands while you're at the store. Wash your hands before and after going. Try to maintain a distance of at least six feet from others while out. After unpacking the food at home, wash your hands again. If you're in a high-risk group like the elderly or immunosuppressed, it is best to ask someone else to shop for you or have groceries delivered.