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GTA

Should you do it? Toronto experts rank 29 once-mundane activities by their COVID-19 risk

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Going to the gym, going to church, playing some golf, having a drink on the patio at your favourite bar, taking the TTC.

These are things we once took for granted and did without thinking.

Maybe not anymore.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many of them have been off-limits, deemed unsafe.

But as Ontario dips its big toe into reopening and you consider whether to take part in some of these activities again, what really should be your comfort level?

“We’re all getting anxious. I know I am. I would like to go do some things,” said Gerald Audette, associate dean in the Faculty of Science at York University. “We’ve got a good handle on this, but we haven’t got it completely licked yet.

“We’re at that point where, yeah, if we’re intelligent about this, you can do some things. However, you’ve got to be aware.”

The Star surveyed five university health professionals to get their take on just how comfortable they’d feel doing formerly mundane activities.

The questions were open-ended. Their answers — on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 indicating a level of risk that made the expert extremely uncomfortable — are not recommendations, more generalizations to get people to think. It’s a conversation, not a scientific survey.

If there was a consensus, it was that outdoor activities where social distancing is easier are far less risky than prolonged indoor activities with other people.

“Indoors is always going to be much, much less safe,” said Colin Furness, an epidemiologist and assistant professor at the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Information. “Length of exposure and closeness, those are the major risks.”

And activities where you know and trust the other participants are much less risky than with strangers involved.

“We should be doing bubbling,” said Furness. “If you just hung out with people you trusted, you’d be way less at risk.”

From hiking to attending an indoor party, here’s the list:

Going hiking — rated from 0 to 2

As a group, our experts were most comfortable with hiking — so long as it wasn't hiking in a pack. "If it's pretty isolated and you're just bumping into a couple of people, probably a 1," said Thomas Tenkate, an expert in health risk assessment at the School of Occupational and Public Health at Ryerson University. "But if it's more crowded, and every minute you're bumping into someone, that's ramping it up to a 6."

Going for a bike ride — rated from 0 to 3

After hiking, our experts were most comfortable with going for a bike ride. "When you're on a bike, you can't get too close to people, so I think it's pretty safe," said Tenkate.

"If you're by yourself, it's a 0," said Timothy Sly, an expert in influenza pandemics at Ryerson's School of Occupational and Public Health.

Playing golf or tennis — rated from 0 to 2

Golf these days involve individual carts and not touching the flag. Both sports lend themselves well to social distancing. "If you're stuck in the clubhouse with a bunch of other people who are angry about losing golf balls, well, that might be a little different," said Audette, who gave a 0 rating. "But you can effectively socially distance even in a party of four."

"They're both activities where you have a bit more control over social distancing," said Tenkate, one of three experts to give a 2. "If you're like me, you're pretty isolated because you're looking for the ball all the time."

Going camping — rated from 0 to 4

A family trip to a provincial park seems an acceptable risk. "You can stay on your own little campsite, but it depends on what the kids are doing and how they're mixing," said Anna Banerji, director of Global and Indigenous Health in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto.

"You're reasonably isolated when you're camping anyway," said Tenkate. "Apart from, I suppose, the use of public facilities."

Said Sly, who gave a 4: "If you go with 16 other people and a huge case of beer, it's very different."

Visiting the dog park — rated from 1 to 5

Another relatively low-risk outdoor activity where the dog walker has social-distancing control — although the dogs may change that equation. "People like to be a little bit social when they're there," said Tenkate, who gave the lone 5. "Some dogs are more social, too."

Going inside a library or museum — rated from 1.5 to 4

These activities got good marks for COVID-19 comfort, despite being indoors, because the experts believed the managers of libraries and museums would take proper care of their patrons. "In these sorts of activities people tend not to be all over each other," said Sly. "They tend to keep separate."

Added Audette: "You can limit access."

Going to the beach — rated from 1 to 5

The outdoors and the idea of relatively easy spacing got the experts to skew toward comfort. "I'm thinking about what you're doing and how much you can control in regard to your interactions with other people," said Tenkate. "I think you can control your interactions a little bit easier at the beach, versus in a public swimming pool."

Going to the dentist — rated from 1 to 6

Even though it's indoors — and it got our first rating on the top half of the scale, a 6 from Sly — the experts were largely comfortable that those involved with dentistry are health professionals who take sanitary practices seriously and have proper personal protective equipment. "Dentists will be really hardcore about this," said Furness. "There's going to be masks, and there's going to be PPE."

A backyard BBQ with friends — rated from 1.5 to 5

Being outdoors, choosing the people to invite and being in control of their surroundings led to relatively high comfort. "As long as I know the friends I'm having over, and we've understood about how we're social distancing, and we're all aware of where we've been and what we're doing, I'm fine with that," said Audette.

Playing road hockey — rated from 2 to 5.5

Not quite as in-your-face physical as basketball, not quite as socially distant as golf or tennis. "I would be asking the people I was playing with what's going on, how are you guys feeling," said Audette. "If we're all comfortable with each other and we've all been quote-unquote good people, I would be OK."

Going to a hair salon, barber or nail salon – rated from 3 to 8

One high-end response, an 8 from Furness, but overall one of few indoor activities the health experts were comfortable with because they trust the barbers and salons to be professional when it comes to hygiene and protecting their customers. The workers, after all, run more risk than their customers.

“The ones I’ve seen have been practising (safe habits) as much as they can,” said Sly. “Nobody in the waiting room, one customer at a time. It can be done.”

Working in an office – rated from 1 to 7.5

A wide range of answers.

Audette, who offered a 1, said he’d be comfortable in his office, where he can close the door.

“It depends if you have to use an elevator and it’s a big tower,” said Furness, who offered a 7.

“You can actually give people space nicely, working away in the computer and desks,” said Sly, who gave a 4. “But it’s the pinch points when you get to the office, the elevator, the elevator button, the handrails, the subway getting there, the lunchroom.”

Walking in a crowd on Queens Quay or the boardwalk – rated from 1 to 8

Another wide range, with experts torn between the benefit of being outside and the whole idea of being in a crowd.

“If it’s a moderate crowd where I can actively socially distance myself, I’m fine with that,” said Audette, who gave it a 1.

“Just a sea of bugs,” said Tenkate, who gave it a 7.5.

Going to the gym – rated from 2.5 to 7

Our first activity to get an average rating worse than 5, but the experts held vastly different opinions. Furness gave it a 7, worried about “sweaty machines” and the ability to distance in locker rooms. Audette’s 2.5 reflected a belief that gyms would adequately enforce social distancing and clean machines. “People going to the gym is a much more adult audience, so they’re all going to be much more aware,” said Audette.

None of the experts were high on the idea of group workouts, however. “Doing a Zumba class would be disastrous,” said Sly.

Eating and drinking on a restaurant patio – rated from 3 to 9

The crowds are risky, but being outside helps with the comfort zone. Being able to socially distance, as well. “The one thing I would worry about at that point is the serving staff,” said Audette. “Mainly because there’s going to be interacting with multiple people.”

Playing basketball outside – rated from 3 to 8

A three-on-three schoolyard game is problematic, the experts say, because it would involve a lot of contact and maybe strangers joining in. “You’re going to get a lot of contact. I’d have to know who I was playing with,” said Audette.

“You’re getting sweat and viruses and bacteria all over you,” said Sly.

Going to an outdoor public pool – rated from 3 to 9.5

Summer is approaching, and so are sunny days when lots of people might want to cool off. At 9.5, Banerji was least comfortable. “So many people around. You can’t control kids,” she said.

Furness gave an outdoor crowded pool scenario a 3, but said it would go much higher on an indoor pool.

Sitting in a doctor’s waiting room – rated from 1.5 to 9

The idea of being in one with other patients didn’t sit well with most (Audette gave the lowest rating of 1.5). Doctors would be wise, they said, to limit numbers.

“It always was a problem,” said Sly. “You go there with an ingrown toenail and you come out with a throat infection. If there was only one person in it, there’s no problem at all. If it’s a normal waiting room with lots of people waiting — which I don’t think is happening these days — people are going to be there anyway because they’ve got something quite wrong with them.”

Visiting elderly relatives – rated from 3 to 9

A nursing home visit caused a lot of consternation since the elderly have been hit particularly hard by COVID-19. For that, the experts preach extreme caution. They wouldn’t want to inadvertently introduce the virus, which can happen even from asymptomatic and presymptomatic patients.

"If you think about the broader scope of things, what is isolation for people doing versus disease transmission risk? If it's done with good consideration for prevention measures, then it's not no-risk but it's lower-risk," said Tenkate.

Visiting healthy elderly parents in their homes was less concerning, they agreed.

Eating at a buffet – rated from 5 to 8

This gave the experts the shivers. They acknowledged restaurants could be trusted to adhere to social distancing rules, but were deterred at the thought of lines at the food bar and sharing serving utensils. "It depends how crowded as it is, but I certainly wouldn't do it," said Furness, who gave it a 6.

"I'm not comfortable with doing that at the moment," said Tenkate, who offered a 7.5.

Getting on an airplane – rated from 5 to 9

Airlines and airports are pushing the narrative they have safety figured out. The experts were less sure, even with empty seats. "It's not just the plane, but it's the whole process of having to line up. At various points in the whole process you end up having to be close to people," said Tenkate.

"I would wear a mask, I would be social distancing where I can, I would be very aware of what was going on. I would be vigilant," said Audette.

"I'd still be nervous," said Sly.

Letting your kids sleep over at a friend's place – rated from 4 to 8

Even going over scenarios where the number of children was limited to two and with both families trusting each other, there was still reluctance. "If it was one kid and a family that you knew, and they were completely virus-free, you never can tell. I'd be more cautious," said Audette.

"We're not doing it, and I don't think we would want to," said Tenkate.

Eating and drinking inside a restaurant – rated from 5 to 10

The same activity as on a patio, but the indoors changes everything. Sly gave it a no-go 10 (this was the only activity to get a maximum rating). "Bars are a problem and will be for a long time," he said. "People get a little back-slappy."

Going to the theatre – rated from 6 to 8

Live theatre with a lot of clapping might be slightly worse than, say, a movie theatre. Either way, being indoors and side-by-side with strangers left the experts with a great deal of discomfort. "Getting a complete six-foot circle around everybody is going to be a bigger challenge," said Audette.

"That's what worries me," said Sly.

Going to church – rated from 5 to 9

The idea of strangers sitting beside each other indoors for an hour or so left our experts unanimous in their discomfort. "Shoulder to shoulder and singing? That's going to be a 9," said Furness.

Riding the subway – rated from 5 to 9

Be careful on the TTC, was the message from the experts. If the train is empty and you're wearing a mask and have hand sanitizer at the ready, then it might be a 3, said Sly, "but if distancing is completely breached and you are in the breathing zones of dozens of people for up to 40 minutes" then it's much higher. (Sly gave a final rating of 9.)

"Even though the TTC is asking people to wear masks and has blocked off some seating, there can still be crowding on the platform and in the subway cars. This means that it is still difficult to maintain the recommended social distance," said Tenkate.

Taking the ferry to the Islands – rated from 5.5 to 8

Not that it's possible, yet. Being outdoors on the Islands – either the beach or going for a walk or bike ride – seems fine. The ferry, however, offers an uncomfortable pinch point.

Tenkate: "I've been on the ferry and it's pretty crowded. It's hot, and everyone's sweaty and so it's probably not (for me) unless they put in a bit more distancing."

Audette: "Once you're on Centre Island you can social distance, of course, but getting there is a challenge."

Going to a wedding – rated from 6 to 8

Indoors, crowds, lots of social contact and drinking. “At events like this, you might not be able to socially distance as well as you would like,” said Audette.

“Lots of people drinking, who at the best (of times) don’t observe boundaries,” said Banerji.

Going to a child’s birthday party – rated from 5 to 9

Like a wedding, but swap in hyper preteens for the drunk adults. Most experts didn’t like what they saw, and this activity got the worst rating on average. Banerji gave it a 9, because “there’s a whole bunch of people.”

Audette was the most optimistic, coming in at a milder 5, “mainly because a lot of people will try to do that social distancing, which is really what you need to be doing in a situation like this.” But he acknowledged “once you’ve got a sniffle, you’ve got problems.”



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