

Precautions still essential as Monterey County reopens



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As the shelter-in-place order is modified and more businesses and activities reopen or resume, many people have questions about what is “safe” for them to do and what precautions they should continue to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Dr. Martha Blum, medical director of infection prevention at Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula, provided this guidance, based on information from Monterey County’s Health Department, the state of California, and the CDC.

“These questions are on everyone’s mind, but there are not cut-and-dried answers at this time,” Dr. Blum says. “The answer to almost all is ‘it depends.’ Everything comes with some element of risk and people need to know how to minimize that risk and then decide whether the risk is worth it. The best basic advice is to use the recommendations from our state and local health officials and let common sense be your guide.”

“The virus is still circulating locally — Monterey County has seen more, not fewer, cases reported in the first two weeks of June. It may help to think of the shelter-in-place order as having created a ‘protective bubble’ around individual households. Now that people are considering venturing outside the home for more than just essential services, it is important to understand what can be done to continue to minimize the risk of getting infected and prevent the spread of infection to vulnerable family members.”

Q. Do I need to continue to socially distance from others?

A. Yes, when in public, you should continue to remain at least six feet away from other people who are not part of your immediate household.

Q. Do I still need to wear a mask?

A. Yes, you should continue to wear a mask or face covering at all times if you are out in public and/or unable to maintain a safe social distance of at least six feet. Some exceptions do exist. If you have breathing problems and can’t physically tolerate wearing the mask, the CDC recommends holding a tissue or handkerchief lightly over your mouth and nose as an alternative. The county’s order does not require wearing a face covering while driving alone or when you are exclusively with other members of your family or household in a vehicle.

Q. Do I need to wear a mask if I’m outdoors, like at the beach or on the Recreation Trail or at the wharf?

A. Yes, it is recommended that you still wear a protective face covering, if possible, if you can’t maintain a safe distance of at least six feet from others. The county health office has provided exceptions for vigorous exercise

where the face covering could be detrimental to one's health and safety. Wearing a face covering is recommended, but not required, while engaged in outdoor recreation such as walking, hiking, bicycling, or running. But each person must comply with social distancing requirements, including maintaining at least six feet of separation from all other people to the greatest extent possible. It's also recommended that each person engaged in such activity have an easily accessible face covering and wear it in when it is difficult to meet social distancing requirements. Running and bicycling cause people to more forcefully expel airborne particles, which makes the usual minimum six-foot distance requirement less adequate. Runners and cyclists must take extra measures to avoid exposing others, including wearing a face covering when possible, maintaining distance of more than six feet, avoid spitting, and avoid running or cycling directly in front of or behind another runner or cyclist who is not from the same household.

Q. Can my family and I socialize with others?

A. Visiting family and friends outside your household still presents a risk of spreading coronavirus, so it's best to stay connected through phone and video calls. Keeping distance is especially important for people who are at higher risk of getting very sick, including older people, and people of any age who have underlying medical conditions. If you do in-person visits with family or friends who don't live in your home, take steps to keep everyone safe such as:

- Wear a face covering or cloth mask
- Keep at least six feet between yourself and others, even when you wear a face covering
- Visit outdoors when possible
- Wash your hands often
- Clean and disinfect commonly touched surfaces

Q. Is it safe to use restrooms in public places?

A. All places outside your home have some element of risk of acquiring the virus.

Q. Is there some sort of checklist or rule of thumb to use when determining whether to go to a business — whether it's a grocery store, restaurant, clothing store, office, etc., or to do an activity?

A. Most people get infected with coronavirus by having prolonged (more than 15 minutes) close contact (less than six feet) with someone who is infected. It is also possible to get infected by touching something contaminated with the virus then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes. Many people who are infected have very mild symptoms and may not appear ill. In general, to minimize the risk of getting infected, you should avoid prolonged close contact with anyone not wearing a face covering outside of your immediate household (assuming no one in your household has COVID-19), wear a face covering, frequently disinfect your hands and frequently touched surfaces, and avoid touching your mouth, nose, or eyes with unclean hands. Obviously, a face covering can't be worn while eating or drinking at dine-in restaurants, so additional social distancing measures must be in place to maintain the minimum six-foot distance between people.

As the county's order and guidance from the CDC are evolving, it's important to check their websites for the most up-to-date information:

- co.monterey.ca.us/government/departments-a-h/health
- cdc.gov/coronavirus



Community Hospital
of the Monterey Peninsula
Montage Health