

# Is Halloween Safe This Year?

## The CDC considers door-to-door trick-or-treating high risk for COVID-19

by Wendy Helfenbaum, AARP, September 24, 2020



If the thought of greeting ghouls and goblins at your door has you thinking Boo! — and not in a good way — you're not alone. Halloween, like every other occasion during this COVID-19 pandemic, will feel different this year.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has classified door-to-door trick-or-treating as posing a high risk for transmitting the coronavirus. So in neighborhoods where children descend for tricks and treats, many people are wondering how to enjoy the festivities safely. Are there socially distant ways to give out candy or take your grandson door-to-door?

The CDC guidance around Halloween groups activities by risk level: Virtual events like online costume or pumpkin-carving contests carry the least risk; small outdoor events and indoor in-person gatherings where everyone is masked and 6 feet apart are considered moderately risky; and medium- to large-size gatherings, as well as close contact from door-to-door trick-or-treating, can be high-risk for spreading the virus.

Some localities have imposed limits or issued stern warnings about traditional Halloween activities such as parades, haunted houses and crowded indoor parties where guests bob for apples.

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health was one of the first to weigh in, issuing guidelines that suggest people skip door-to-door visits with children in favor of a Halloween drive-in movie night. New York City's famous Greenwich Village Halloween Parade was nixed, as were Disney's Halloween parties in California and Florida. In the Chicago area, the Great Highwood Pumpkin Festival has been canceled.

As Halloween approaches, it's worth checking for updates with your local health department or consulting AARP's list of coronavirus-related state-by-state crowd restrictions. And in the meantime, here's advice provided by two health experts on marking the holiday while staying safe.

## **The scary truth about Halloween this year**

"The rules of virus transmission don't change because it's a holiday," says Anne Rimoin, a Los Angeles, California-based professor of epidemiology at UCLA's Fielding School of Public Health and an expert on emerging infections and global health.

"There is no zero-risk scenario when mixing with others outside your household in the midst of a pandemic, especially in areas where community spread is elevated," she says.

In Salem, Massachusetts — perhaps the country's spookiest town — children usually arrive by the busload to celebrate Halloween, says resident Julie Beauchamp-McLean, 50.

"Normally, we sit on our stoop, have a glass of wine and hand out 800 pieces of candy," she says. This year she won't be doing that. "The risk is just too great of spreading the disease through close contact and touching candy."

According to Beauchamp-McLean, about 40 percent of her neighbors have said they won't be handing out candy.



## **Suggestions for a Safe Halloween**

- Check with your local government to determine whether there are Halloween restrictions in place.
- Consider packaging candy in individual bags that trick-or-treaters can grab to avoid interaction.
- Skip crowded Halloween parties and indoor gatherings.
- Assess your risk. If you have underlying health conditions, you may want to opt out of Halloween activities.
- Wear a mask and use hand sanitizer if you plan to give out candy or accompany children as they trick-or-treat.
- Try Halloween alternatives such as a candy scavenger hunt or spooky backyard games.

## **Is celebrating Halloween worth the risk?**

People over 65 or those with underlying health conditions face greater risk for poor outcomes should they contract the coronavirus, Rimoin notes, so consider your own risk threshold when deciding whether to participate in Halloween activities this year.

In Lakewood, Ohio, Joan Burda, 68, and her spouse, Betsy Ashley, 56, will be keeping their porch light dark on Oct. 31. They're both in the high-risk category due to age and underlying health conditions. Ashley is a primary caregiver for her mother. "Nothing is normal anymore, and we think it best to take a more cautious approach," Burda says.

## **Welcome trick-or-treaters wisely**

If you can't imagine not giving treats to neighborhood kids, maintain proper social distancing at your front door or porch, wear a face mask and sanitize your hands often, says Nadeen White, M.D., a pediatrician in Atlanta. Skip the homemade goods this year — individually packaged goodies are a safer bet.

In Huntsville, Alabama, Betty Bolte, 55, and her husband, Chris, 60, found a safer way to distribute candy. "We intend to decorate with a Halloween flag, and put candy into individual bags in a Halloween-themed bowl on a table on the front porch for kids to take," she says.

Michael Dean, 58, and his wife, Pickett, 54, of Asheville, North Carolina, are also looking forward to Halloween this year and will incorporate extra precautions. "We'll probably print little posters telling people our home is safe for Halloween," he says.

To prevent direct contact with the children, the couple — wearing clean gloves — will put candy on paper plates that are stacked on a chair for trick-or-treaters.

"This should definitely minimize risks for everyone involved," he says. "We think it's worth it to keep Halloween going in a year that could use a little light."

### **The trick to safer trick-or-treating**

Trick-or-treating in a relatively quiet neighborhood outdoors while staying socially distant from groups of people you don't know carries a lower risk than going to a haunted house or an indoor Halloween party, UCLA's Rimoin says. Integrate cloth masks and face shields or eye protection into your costume, and bring hand sanitizer along so you can disinfect your little ones' hands frequently.

However, be aware that even if you're wearing a mask, being exposed to strangers raises the danger factor, pediatrician White notes.

"You're face-to-face with a lot of people, and you can't trust that everyone will be wearing masks when answering the door. You may also be touching things that may be contaminated, like candies in bowls where people were rummaging through," she explains.

White suggests setting up a safe pod on your street to limit contact.

"Screen your neighbors to see what their risk factors are. If you're on a cul-de-sac where you know people have been very careful about not going out or traveling or doing dangerous activities, and no one's had COVID-19, you can all wear masks and go trick-or-treating to six or 10 houses," she says.

In San Diego, Stacey Lund, 50, loves taking her 11-year-old daughter Emma trick-or-treating. "This year, it's tricky," she admits. The good weather in San Diego makes it easier for people to sit outside and hand out candy from a safe distance. But the threat of the virus also concerns her.

Lund adds that the stresses caused by the pandemic mean kids are more in need of fun and normalcy than ever before — within reason. Lund says Emma will dress up, wear a mask and walk the neighborhood with friends while social distancing.

### **Carving out some resourceful ideas**

Some Halloween lovers are finding creative ways to be festive this year. One Ohio man has attached a socially distant candy chute made of cardboard to his porch rail through which he can safely send goodies to trick-or-treaters.

White suggests organizing a Halloween-themed scavenger hunt, either in the back yard or on a few quiet streets, where your grandchildren can find hidden treats and toys. You can also set up outdoor games in the yard, such as a mini-pumpkin toss, pumpkin golf or mummy bowling. Or tell spooky stories around a firepit (don't forget the s'mores!) after screening an outdoor movie.