

5 Rules to Live By During a Pandemic

There's no playbook for living through a pandemic, so we decided to create one. With some basic rules to guide you, everyone can lower risk and live a full life while we wait for the virus to get under control.



By Tara Parker-Pope

June 9, 2020, 5:00 a.m. ET

While it might feel as if the coronavirus crisis is over, it's not. The virus is still out there.

But some things have changed. To start, lockdowns are ending because cases are low or falling in some areas or because state leaders have decided to move ahead despite the risk. Testing has increased, giving us more indicators of community health. Plus we know a lot more about how the virus behaves and what activities pose the highest risk.

And because life on permanent lockdown isn't sustainable, public health experts are beginning to embrace a "harm reduction" approach, giving people alternatives to strict quarantine. These options — like forming a "bubble" with another household or moving social activities outdoors — don't eliminate risk, but they minimize it as people try to return to daily life.

Nobody knows exactly what will happen as communities open up. The most likely scenario is that virus cases will continue to surge and fall around the globe for the foreseeable future.

"It's hard to imagine how we will avoid another surge in infections, which is why these harm reduction approaches that keep people away from much higher risk situations are so important," said Julia Marcus, an infectious disease epidemiologist and assistant professor in the department of population medicine at Harvard Medical School. "If someone expanding their bubble keeps them from having crowded dinner parties or going to bars, then that is a success."

While we've learned to live with masks and social distancing, as well as new rituals of hand-washing after handling packages and touching surfaces, we need some basic rules to minimize risk and still have a life going forward. We've consulted with several public health experts and scientists to give you the tools you need to make your own decisions, whether it's dining at a restaurant, going to church or simply getting a haircut.

1. Check the health of your state and community

To gauge your risk of coming into contact with an infected person, pay attention to two important indicators of Covid-19 in your area: the percentage of tests that are positive, and the trend in overall case rates.

Start by learning the percentage of positive Covid-19 tests in your state, which tells you if testing and contact tracing are finding mild and asymptomatic cases. When positive test rates stay at **5 percent or lower for two weeks**, that suggests there's adequate testing in your state to get virus transmission under control, and you're less likely to cross paths with the virus. The closer the number is to 2 percent, the better.

"It doesn't mean you have total freedom," warns Erin Bromage, a comparative immunologist and biology professor at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. "It means there's enough testing going on there that you can feel confident that your interactions in society are going to be of much lower risk."

If the percentage of positive tests starts to rise, you should take more precautions.

To find out whether your state is meeting the testing criteria, go to your state health department website. Or you can use this chart from Johns Hopkins University The website Covid Act Now allows you to see positive test rates by county.

Next, use our maps and case count pages to stay informed of the Covid-19 trends in your area. When **the number of overall cases is low or falling**, you should feel safer, but you still need to be vigilant. Be more cautious when case counts start rising.

2. Limit the number of your close contacts

You're safest with members of your household, but if you want to widen your circle to extended family or friends, keep the number of close contacts as low and as consistent as possible. One way to do this is to form a "corona bubble," which happens when two households form an exclusive social circle, agreeing on safety guidelines and to see only each other. The arrangement allows people to visit each other's homes and lead a somewhat normal, if limited, social life. It may be particularly helpful for families with similar structures — such as those with young children longing for playmates or teenagers seeking in-person contact.

The arrangement requires a high level of trust. How does each family define reasonable precautions? Count the number of potential “leaks” for each member of the bubble — such as trips to the store or office, play dates, children and teens who see friends, or housekeepers and nannies who may visit multiple homes.

Keep communication open and without judgment, so people feel comfortable disclosing new exposure risks and potential “leaks” in the bubble.

“People’s activities are going to change every day — schools may reopen, someone may decide to go to protest,” said Dr. Marcus. “This is not just a one-time agreement. The communication about risk needs to be ongoing and open.”

3. Manage your exposure budget

Risk is cumulative. Going forward, you’ll need to make trade-offs, choosing activities that are most important to you (like seeing an aging parent) and skipping things that might matter less (an office going-away party). Think about managing virus risk just as you might manage a diet: If you want dessert, eat a little less for dinner.

During a pandemic, every member of the household should manage their own exposure budget. (Think Weight Watchers points for virus risk.) You spend very few budget points for low-risk choices like a once-a-week grocery trip or exercising outdoors. You spend more budget points when you attend an indoor dinner party, get a haircut or go to the office. You blow your budget completely if you spend time in a crowd.

“Moving into a long-term management phase, we have to start thinking like this,” says Johannes Eichstaedt, a computational social scientist and psychology professor at Stanford University. “Don’t take risks where it’s not needed, and make trade-offs that are congruent with your larger health needs and priorities. If seeing my grandchild in the park means, to balance this, I can only go to the supermarket every other week, maybe that’s a trade-off I’m willing to make for my mental health and well-being.”

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Frequently Asked Questions and Advice

Updated June 5, 2020

● How does blood type influence coronavirus?

A study by European scientists is the first to document a strong statistical link between genetic variations and Covid-19, the illness caused by the coronavirus. Having Type A blood was linked to a 50 percent increase in the likelihood that a patient would need to get oxygen or to go on a ventilator, according to the new study.

● How many people have lost their jobs due to coronavirus in the U.S.?

The unemployment rate fell to 13.3 percent in May, the Labor Department said on June 5, an unexpected improvement in the nation’s job market as hiring rebounded faster than economists expected. Economists had forecast the

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Unfortunately, there’s no magic number to determine your personal exposure budget and the exposure “costs” of different actions. But think about your overall exposure budget when you make decisions to spend time with other people, particularly older people and those with high-risk conditions.

4. Keep higher risk activities as short as possible

Every time you make plans, ask yourself, “If an infected person happens to be nearby, how much time could I be spending with them?” It takes an extended period of close contact with an infected person, or extended time in a poorly ventilated room with an infected person, to have a substantial risk of catching the virus through the air, said Linsey Marr, an aerosol scientist at Virginia Tech.

When making decisions, keep indoor events brief and move social events outdoors. Wear a mask and practice social distancing. Here’s some guidance about time of exposure.

Brief exposure: Brief encounters, particularly those outside — like passing someone on the sidewalk or a runner who huffs and puffs past your picnic — are unlikely to make you sick.

Face-to-face contact: Wear a mask, and keep close conversations short. We don’t know the level of exposure required to make you sick, but estimates range from a few hundred to 1,000 copies of the virus. In theory, you might reach the higher estimate after just five minutes of close conversation, given that a person might expel 200 viral particles a minute through speech. When health officials perform contact tracing, they typically look for people with whom you’ve spent at least 15 minutes in close contact.

Indoor exposure: In an enclosed space, like an office, at a birthday party, in a restaurant or in a church, you can still become infected from a person across the room if you share the same air for an extended period of time. There's no proven time limit that is safest, but based on contact tracing guidelines and the average rate at which we expel viral particles — through breathing, speaking and coughing — it's best to keep indoor activities, like shopping or haircuts, to less than an hour. Even shorter is better.

As you make decisions, Dr. Bromage suggests you consider the volume of air space (open space is safer than a small meeting room), the number of people in the space (fewer is better) and how much time everyone is together (keep it brief). To learn more about timing and risk, read Dr. Bromage's blog post on the topic, which has been viewed more than 18 million times.

5. Keep taking pandemic precautions

Already some people in many communities have stopped wearing masks, suspended social distancing and returned to their pre-pandemic socializing. Time will tell if case counts start to rise as a result, but in the coming months you would be wise to adopt the following habits.

- Keep a mask handy. Wear a mask in enclosed spaces, when you shop or go to the office and anytime you are in close contact with people outside your household.
- Practice social distancing — staying six feet apart — when you are with people who live outside your household. Keep social activities outdoors.
- Wash hands frequently, and be mindful about touching public surfaces (elevator buttons, hand rails, subway poles, and other high-touch areas)
- Adopt stricter quarantine practices if you or someone in your circle is at higher risk.