What Is Social Distancing?

CDC-recommended guidelines to help stop the spread of coronavirus.

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> **Stay Updated:** A Detailed Timeline of Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) Cases According to the CDC, WHO

"Social distancing" is a term used to describe infection control actions taken by public health officials to stop or slow down the spread of a highly contagious disease. Most recently, it's been referenced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as one of the best strategies in preventing the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19).

The CDC defines social distancing as "remaining out of congregate settings, avoiding mass gatherings and maintaining distance (approximately 6 feet) from others when possible." It is less drastic than quarantine or isolation, which are used for people who are suspected to be carrying the virus.

While some people may find social distancing to be a big relief—canceling business-related travel to a conference may give someone peace of mind—others find it to be a major inconvenience. Many concerts and public gatherings have been canceled due to the recommendations about social distancing.

> Clearly, social distancing may be the most effective way for people who aren't infected with the coronavirus to avoid getting it. But it does lead to some major changes in how businesses are run, public events are held, and social interactions occur.

Understanding what it means, why it's recommended, and how to practice it can help alleviate any fears you may have.

Why Is the CDC Recommending It?

According to the CDC, coronavirus is spread mainly through person-to-person contact. It's believed that people who are in close contact (within 6 feet of one another) are most likely to spread it. It spreads through respiratory droplets that are produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of anyone nearby and may be inhaled into the lungs, which can spread the disease.

> And while it's believed that people who are the sickest are most likely to spread coronavirus, some people might spread it before they begin to show symptoms. That's why it may be important to practice social distancing even with people who don't appear ill.

It may also be possible to contract COVID-19 through contaminated surfaces or objects. An individual who touches a surface that has the virus on it and then touches their own mouth or nose, for example, may contract the virus.

The CDC believes COVID-19 spreads easily throughout communities. So they have recommended social distancing as a way to help stop the spread.

If individuals reduce their contact with one another, people will be less likely to pass the virus on. This can be the best way to prevent what they refer to as "community spread."

Some examples of ways that individuals and organizations have already begun putting social distancing in place include:

- Companies establishing work from home policies
- Colleges closing down campuses
- Cancellation of mass gatherings like SXSW
- Professional sports leagues suspending their seasons

While the CDC isn't recommending everyone take drastic measures like isolating themselves, they are advising people to take precautions, especially those who may be at a higher risk for contracting the disease.

How Does Social Distancing Help During a Pandemic?

A 2010 study published in *BioMed Central (BMC) Public Health* assessed whether social distancing is effective in slowing or reducing the transmission of influenza during an outbreak. Researchers found that workplace social distancing reduced the number of overall flu cases.

However, the study also discovered that the success rate was greater in areas where people practiced other preventative measures, such as more frequent handwashing and other strategies to keep their immune systems strong.

So while social distancing may be an important factor in preventing the spread of coronavirus, practicing good hygiene and taking other safety precautions may also be important steps in preventing the spread.

> It's important to remember that you may need a combination of safety methods in place to figh the spread of the disease as effectively as possible.

Flattening the Curve

You may have seen references in the news or on social media to "flattening the curve" as a goal of social distancing. When new cases spike very quickly, hospitals and other medical facilities can be overwhelmed and unable to adequately treat everyone—including patients who are not actually dealing with the coronavirus. Such spikes are more likely when social distancing measures are not enacted quickly and early enough.

By slowing the number of new cases and stretching them out over a longer period of time—or "flattening the curve" of new cases—we can keep the number of total cases (and the number of high-risk cases) below that threshold, so that our hospitals have enough space and resources to operate as smoothly as possible during this difficult time.

How to Social-Distance in Your Own Life

The most obvious way to practice social distancing is to avoid crowded public places where close contact with others may occur. These might include movie theaters, religious gatherings, and crowded restaurants. Of course, it's not always easy to practice social distancing.

Tips and Tricks

- Opt for online meetings rather than workplace gatherings whenever possible.
- Work from home if you can.
- Postpone major social gatherings.
- Consider video-chatting with friends and family rather than meeting in public places.
- Limit or postpone air travel and cruise ship travel.
- Stock up on vital items so you don't have to go to stores as often.

- Order groceries from a delivery service.

- Shop online rather than in stores.

What to Do If You Live Alone

If you live alone, social-distancing may be easier for you in many ways. You won't be exposed to as many people if you don't have other family members coming and going. Yet it can also present some challenges for you.

You may need to ensure that you're not becoming too isolated. Loneliness and depression can become a real problem if you don't interact with others. So if you've started working from home, avoiding social gatherings, and you're not going out as much, then make sure to monitor your mental health.

Check in with friends and family regularly so you can keep some social contact with others. Speak with them on the phone, text throughout the day, or set up video calls to ensure that you aren't getting too isolated.

Other Times to Practice Social Distancing

Social distancing isn't just something you should practice during a pandemic. It's something you may want to do any time your immune system is compromised.

You might also practice it if there are other illnesses in your community. An outbreak of influenza, for example, may be reduced if people reduced their contact with one another.

Staying Calm and Positive

Staying calm during a pandemic can seem impossible. But, managing your stress and anxiety in a healthy way is important so you can make the best decisions possible.

While social distancing may seem like a drastic step to take, it's just a precautionary measure. And if you're practicing it, there's still a good chance you are healthy. Otherwise, you may be placed into a quarantine situation.

> Think of it as a proactive extra precaution to keep yourself and your family safe. If you have children, explain to them that you're doing this as a way to keep everyone healthy. If you panic your kids will likely get anxious, so make it clear that this is just another step you're taking to help the family and the community.

A Word From Verywell

While it's important to stay informed on the latest news, take care of yourself by limiting your exposure to the media. If you are spending a lot more time at home and around your television, this can be difficult, but constantly watching media reports of new outbreaks and deaths can raise your anxiety during a time when it's important to stay calm.

Try to find other more enjoyable activities around your home that can help take your mind off the situation, even if that means spending some time watching Netflix instead of the news.

Article Sources

Verywell Mind uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts within our articles. Read our editorial process to learn more about how we fact-check and keep our content accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

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