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It's Time to Get Serious About Social Distancing. Here's How.

Maria Godoy and Allison Aubrey • 1E9 © 2020

Coronavirus Pandemic
Society

Take-Aways

- Avoid non-essential contact with the elderly, but do reach out digitally to mitigate their social isolation. Deliver groceries and send care packages.
- Keep kids at home – avoid play dates, even outside, and if you must send your children to day care, choose a small group.
- Don't gather in crowded public venues, but do buy gift cards to support local businesses and order take-out food to keep restaurants going.

Recommendation

On March 16, Dr. Deborah Birx, the response coordinator of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, spoke at a press conference. She outlined social distancing measures for Americans to adopt, but you may still find yourself wondering what social distancing is supposed to look like on a day-to-day basis. In this NPR.org article, Maria Goody and Allison Aubrey gather actionable advice from relevant experts. They explain how best to handle essential trips like grocery runs, and they also cover how to support lonely older relatives, bored kids and failing local businesses.

Summary

Avoid non-essential contact with the elderly and immuno-suppressed, but do reach out digitally to mitigate their social isolation. Deliver groceries and send care packages.

As you probably know, COVID-19 poses a higher risk to people with heart or lung conditions, to older adults and to those who are immunosuppressed. If you fit into one of these categories, your government will encourage you to stay home if you live in a place where coronavirus is a threat.

“Every single generation has a role to play. We’re asking our older generation to stay in their homes. We’re asking the younger generations to stop going out in public places, to bars and restaurants, and spreading asymptomatic virus onto countertops and knobs.” – Dr. Deborah Birx in a White House press conference.”

In the interests of keeping the most vulnerable people safe, everyone else should stay away from long-term care facilities, and nursing and retirement homes unless they play an essential role in caring for those who live there. Don’t visit older family members and friends, particularly if you have children. If someone in your household has COVID-19, quarantine that person for 14 days. Dr. Deborah Birx, the response coordinator of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, reports that this action “stopped 100% of transmission outside of the household.”

Make it easier for the older people in your life to practice social distancing by delivering groceries and making sure they have needed medications. While you should avoid in-person visits, you can help mitigate their social isolation by arranging video calls and sending care packages.

Keep kids at home – avoid play dates, even outside, and if you must send your children to day care, choose a small group.

When your children are home from school all day, arranging a play date to help them burn up energy is tempting. But before inviting any little friends over, keep in mind that germs often accumulate in playgrounds, and most small children get up to five viruses each season. Even if they’re not harboring COVID-19, they may spread another virus that requires medical attention. This will pose a problem to an already overloaded medical system, and hospitals are a good place to catch COVID-19. For now, kids should avoid contact with anyone outside of the household.

“Even if you choose only one friend to have over, you are creating new links and possibilities for the type of transmission that all of our school/work/public event closures are trying to prevent.” – Dr. Asaf Bitton

Day care can be risky because the live virus can linger on plastic toys for up to 72 hours. Stool samples from an infected person test positive for the virus weeks after an initial diagnosis. And, children struggle to practice social distancing. They don't understand that someone ill can transmit the virus within about a six-foot radius. If you've got the luxury of keeping your children at home, keep them at home. If you can't, choose a day care facility with fewer children, and encourage caregivers to wipe toys down with disinfectant. If your children are sick, don't take them to day care.

Don't gather in crowded public venues, but do buy gift cards to support local businesses and order take-out food to keep restaurants going.

Guidelines from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) say that lingering in bars or restaurants – if they are still open – is off-limits. Steer clear of any place with more than 10 people. Reschedule non-essential doctor or dentist appointments. You may be tempted by cheap travel deals, but for now it's better to avoid any travel that isn't strictly necessary. Your goal should be to not have contact with anyone outside of your household, though if you're in an area with very little community spread of the coronavirus, it's probably ok to visit one friend at a time.

“Be careful not to touch your face with your hands while you're at the store, and wash your hands before and after going.”

Shop only when it's necessary to get groceries. Go when it's less crowded, wipe down shopping carts and other frequently touched items, and keep your distance from other shoppers. Wash your hands when you get home and again after unpacking your groceries. If you get take-out food from a restaurant, throw away the original containers and wash your hands before eating. Consider ordering a gift card if you want to support a favorite business that has had to close for now.

About the Authors

Maria Godoy hosts NPR's food blog, *The Salt*, and works as a senior editor with NPR's Science Desk. **Allison Aubrey** is an NPR News correspondent. She contributes to *Morning Edition*, *All Things Considered* and *PBS NewsHour*, and she hosts NPR's *Life Kit*.



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