I would like to start this message with "this is not the normal holiday season" and yes, we miss our loved ones and the important social connection that is associated with the holidays. This year, we need to focus on staying safe and reducing risk—even if that means that you cannot necessarily make it to an in-person holiday gathering. Please review the information below in order to make informed decisions in light of the severity of this third wave of COVID-19, for your health and safety, as well as for everyone around you, and to ensure all are around for the holidays to come.

In a recent article posted on the American Medical Associations site, addressing the spike in the number of reported COVID-19 cases, it is noted there are no easy answers and yes, this is a difficult situation to be in.

> *"I do think we should start with: What are our core values?" says Pederson, the psychiatrist and behavioral scientist at Northwestern. "As a family, what is the number one thing that's important to us? And that is that we're able to protect each other, and we're able to care for each other. That we can all agree on, regardless of where you stand on how much you should wear masks and how much social distancing one should engage in or what is the ideal number of people."*

> *"Not gathering for the holidays is the only real safe way to handle the holidays this year," said Dr. Srinivas."*

> *Here is what Dr. Srinivas, a delegate for the [AMA Resident and Fellow Section](#) (RFS), had to say about holiday gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic. "As cases, hospitalizations, and deaths continue to increase across the United States, the safest way to celebrate the winter holidays is to celebrate at home with the people you live with."*

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) states:

Gatherings with family and friends who do not live with you can increase the chances of getting or spreading [COVID-19](#) or the [flu](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic has been [stressful](#) and isolating for many people. Gatherings during the upcoming holidays can be an opportunity to reconnect with family and friends. This holiday season consider how your holiday plans can be modified to reduce the spread of COVID-19 to keep your friends, families, and communities healthy and safe.

CDC offers the following considerations to slow the spread of COVID-19 during small gatherings. These considerations are meant to supplement—not replace—any [state, local, territorial](#), or [tribal](#) health and safety laws, rules, and regulations with which all gatherings must comply.

Considerations for Small Gatherings of Family and Friends

Celebrating virtually or with members of your own household (who are consistently taking [measures](#) to reduce the spread of COVID-19) poses the lowest risk for spread. Your household is anyone who currently lives and shares common spaces in your housing unit (such as your house or apartment). This can include family members, as well as roommates or people who are unrelated to you. People who do not currently live in your housing unit, such as college students who are returning home from school for the holidays, should be considered part of different households. In-person gatherings that bring together family members or friends from different households, including college students returning home, pose varying levels of risk.

Organizers and attendees of larger events should consider the risk of virus spread based on event size (number of attendees and other factors) and take steps to reduce the possibility of infection, as outlined in the [Considerations for Events and Gatherings.](#)

Several factors can contribute to the risk of getting and spreading COVID-19 at small in-person gatherings. In combination, these factors will create various amounts of risk:

Community levels of COVID-19 – High or increasing levels of COVID-19 cases in the gathering location, as well as in the areas where attendees are coming from, increase the risk of infection and spread among attendees. Family and friends should consider the number of COVID-19 cases in their community and in the community where they plan to celebrate when deciding whether to host or attend a gathering. Information on the number of cases in an area can often be found on the local [health department](#) website or on CDC's COVID Data Tracker [County View](#).

Exposure during [travel](#) – Airports, bus stations, train stations, public transport, gas stations, and rest stops are all places travelers can be exposed to the virus in the air and on surfaces.

Location of the gathering – Indoor gatherings, especially those with poor ventilation (for example, small, enclosed spaces with no outside air), pose more risk than outdoor gatherings.

Duration of the gathering – Gatherings that last longer pose more risk than shorter gatherings. Being within 6 feet of someone who has COVID-19 for a cumulative total of 15 minutes or more greatly increases the risk of becoming sick and requires a 14-day quarantine.

Number and crowding of people at the gathering – Gatherings with more people pose more risk than gatherings with fewer people. CDC does not have a limit or recommend a specific number of attendees for gatherings. The size of a holiday gathering should be determined based on the ability of attendees from different households to stay 6 feet (2 arm lengths) apart, wear masks, wash hands, and follow state, local, territorial, or tribal health and safety laws, rules, and regulations.

Behaviors of attendees prior to the gathering – Individuals who did not consistently adhere to social distancing (staying at least 6 feet apart), mask wearing, handwashing, and other prevention behaviors pose more risk than those who consistently practiced these safety measures.

Behaviors of attendees during the gathering – Gatherings with more safety measures in place, such as mask wearing, social distancing, and handwashing, pose less risk than gatherings where fewer or no preventive measures are being implemented. Use of alcohol or drugs may alter judgment and make it more difficult to practice COVID-19 safety measures.

Attending an event or gathering

Prepare before you go

- Stay home if you have been diagnosed with COVID-19 (symptoms of COVID-19), if you are waiting for COVID-19 test results, or may have been exposed to someone with COVID-19.
- Check with the organizer or event venue for updated information about any COVID-19 safety guidelines and if they have steps in place to prevent the spread of the virus.
- Prioritize attending outdoor activities over indoor activities and stay within your local area as much as possible.
- Bring supplies to help you and others stay healthy—for example, masks (bring extra), hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol, and drinking water.
- Use social distancing and limit physical contact.
- Maintain a distance of at least 6 feet or more from people who don't live in your household. Be particularly mindful in areas where it may harder to keep this distance, such as check-in areas, parking lots, and routes of entry and exit.
- Select seating or determine where to stand based on the ability to keep 6 feet of space from people who don't live in your household, including if you will be eating or drinking.

- Arrive to the event early or at off-peak times to avoid crowding and congested areas.
- Avoid using restroom facilities or concession areas at high traffic times, such as intermission, half-time, or immediately at the end of the event.

Wear masks

- Wear a [mask](#) when interacting with other people to minimize the risk of transmitting the virus.
- Wearing masks is most important when social distancing is difficult.
- Masks are strongly encouraged in settings where individuals might raise their voices, such as shouting, chanting, or singing.

Limit contact with commonly touched surfaces or shared items

- Use touchless garbage cans or pails and cashless payment options when possible. Otherwise, exchange cash or card by placing payment in a receipt tray, if available, or on the counter.
- Avoid any self-serve food or drink options, such as buffets, salad bars, and condiment or drink stations. Use grab-and-go meal options, if available.
- Use disposable food service items including utensils and dishes, if available.
- [Wash your hands](#) with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use hand sanitizer immediately before eating food or after touching any common surfaces like hand railings, payment kiosks, door handles, and toilets.

Our collective health and safety during this pandemic clearly require that each of us take personal and shared responsibility to create a safe and healthy environment to protect ourselves and those around us.

Let us take actions required of each of us now and begin to plan for a better 2021.

Season's Greetings

Stay Well

Randy Ankeny, Executive Director

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