

THE DOS AND DONTS OF SEEING PEOPLE RIGHT NOW

By KARA JILLIAN BROWN - WELLANDGOOD.COM - MAY 26, 2020

As states around the country begin to open back up, many people are still left wondering if it's safe to see their friends in person. For some states, "opening" means that you can once again go to the gym or eat at a restaurant. For others, it means that certain retail stores are now allowing for curbside pickup. But what does this mean for hanging out? Should we still be sticking to video chat or is it safe to see friends right now? Marcus Plescia, MD, MPH, chief medical officer of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, says it's okay to see people in person, but you have to follow more than a few rules if you do.

"I know people are frustrated, and I know it's getting a little old having these really extreme precautions that we're taking, but people need to realize that we're still pretty early in this pandemic," says Dr. Plescia. "We know that only a very small proportion of the population, probably like around 5 maybe 10 percent, have actually gotten ill, which means 90 percent of people out there have not had this infection, and are therefore at risk. We also don't even know if you have had it, what kind of immunity you have and whether you might still be able to get it again."

To stay safe, there are a few things you'll want to keep in mind before you decide it is safe to see your friends.

HOW MANY PEOPLE CAN I HANG OUT WITH?

Connie Steed, MSN, RN, president of the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology, says to keep

gatherings small.

"There's some guidance out there that suggests [gathering with] less than 10 people," says Steed. "Ten is a little bit too much for my taste. As a group gets bigger, people forget about that six-foot rule and they get closer together. In my experience with my family and my colleagues, personally I think six or fewer people works."

If children are involved in the social-distance gathering, Steed says to make sure they understand the rules. "You've got to make sure that they understand we're here together to see each other as a family but these are the rules, we're gonna follow to help protect each other, still get to enjoy each other's company," she says.

WHERE IS THE BEST PLACE TO SEE FRIENDS?

Steed says it's best to hang out outside. "I have grandchildren, and I have not touched them since this began," she says. "But on Mother's Day, they were brought over to the house and we didn't go inside, we stayed outside in the fresh air which is really much better and we socially distanced and were able to visit safely." Dr. Plescia adds that you can meet up to hang out in the park, but if you have your own outdoor space, you may want to consider inviting people to hang out there instead.

"If it's your backyard, you can control how things go in the backyard, you can control how the furniture is laid out if you have stuff for people, whereas in a park or other place you may have a little less control over that," he says.

CAN SOMEONE WALK THROUGH MY APARTMENT TO GET TO MY BALCONY OR TO USE THE RESTROOM?

Yes, says Dr. Plescia. But you'll want to make sure everyone is taking certain precautions. "Not that you want to go through life being suspicious of everybody, but anybody can be a potential source of the infection and that is the case, particularly with the situation we have what people are sometimes asymptomatic for periods when they are actually infectious," he says. "You may want to make a special point when finished [in the restroom] to really carefully clean all surfaces and various doorknobs."

When Steed had her grandchildren over to her home, she left disinfecting wipes in the bathroom so people could clean up after themselves. "We should routinely clean horizontal surfaces in our homes and bathrooms and kitchens are high-risk locations," she says. And if someone does need to go inside, limit it to one person at a time.

WHAT ACTIVITIES ARE SAFE TO DO TOGETHER?

As we get used to socially distant hangouts, Dr. Plescia says to keep things simple to start. Try just hanging out and chatting instead of also serving food. It's hard enough to get used to not hugging or shaking hands when you see someone. It's even harder to remember that you don't want to get close enough to someone to hand them a fork. "Until we develop the habit of just keeping that little bit of distance I would just caution people to be very careful," he says.

DO WE HAVE TO WEAR MASKS EVEN IF WE STAY 6 FEET APART?

"Wearing a mask is the safest thing because then if you do get a little closer than six feet it's still relatively safe because you've got the added protection the mask," says Dr. Plescia. If you have a hard time wearing a mask, Steed suggests briefly removing yourself from the gathering to take a few breaths without your mask.

WHAT IF MY FRIEND AND I HAVE A PACT TO ONLY SEE EACH OTHER? CAN WE HANG OUT MASKLESS AND INDOORS?

"It's not a horrible idea, but you've got to be careful," says Steed. "If you do it, you've got to really make sure that you know them well enough to know what they do and where they go. But one thing we got to understand about this virus is that you can catch it in public areas so if somebody's going to the grocery store and they accidentally are in a location where someone happens to cough or whatever there could be the potential for exposure. You're never 100 percent safe even when you have those trusted friends."

WHAT ABOUT THE ELDERLY OR OTHER HIGH-RISK INDIVIDUALS, CAN THEY JOIN?

For now, it's best to stick to virtual visits. "Visiting with them could be an additional risk for them," says Steed. When her grandkids came over, her husband set up a TV in the backyard so the great-grandparents could join over a video call. "We could see them and they could see the kids throw the Frisbee around. It was really cool," she says. "They felt like they were part of the party, and we were keeping them safe."

REMEMBER TO BE PATIENT

"I know it's frustrating. People are ready to move on, but be patient," says Dr. Plescia. "There's an opportunity to loosen things up a little bit and that's going to be nice for people, but if people are impatient or people aren't attentive, we run the risk of getting into a cycle where this just gets revved up again."

