

Q&A: During pandemic, stay connected in ways that don't increase infection risk

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DEAR MAYO CLINIC: I'd like to keep my kids home and safe until COVID-19 is no longer an issue, but my teenager still wants to hang out with her friends. Is this safe?

ANSWER: Social distancing—putting space between yourself and others to reduce the spread of illness—is crucial when it comes to COVID-19. You and your children should avoid large gatherings and keep contact with others in public spaces to a minimum. But that doesn't mean you need to cut your teen off from her friends entirely. Technology can help bridge the gap, and if face-to-face interaction is necessary, there are some things that can be done to reduce risks.

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness that leads to symptoms such as fever, cough, shortness of breath and difficulty breathing. Symptoms can range widely, from mild to severe. The virus that causes COVID-19 is transmitted through [respiratory droplets](#) generated when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The droplets can extend up to 3 to 6 feet from that person and land on the surfaces around that person. If you breathe in the droplets, or they land in your eyes, nose or mouth, or are carried there by your hands, you are at risk of infection.

If you stay at least 6 feet from people who are infected, the risk of being exposed to the virus drops dramatically. Because there is growing evidence to suggest COVID-19 can be transmitted even before someone feels sick, it's important to practice [social distancing](#) even with people do not seem sick.

Social distancing has been shown to effectively slow the spread of infection. It includes avoiding public spaces where you may come in close contact with others as much as possible. This includes malls; theaters; houses of worship; public transportation; or anywhere with large crowds, such as concerts or festivals. For [public spaces](#) that you have to visit, like [grocery stores](#), limit visits to only those that are absolutely essential, leave kids and other family members at home, and go when crowds may be smaller. Wash your hands well before and after the visit. Assign someone else in the family to go if you are sick.

As part of social distancing efforts, many states are closing schools. As in your situation, that can leave children and teens eager to find activities to ward off boredom. For teens, the typical activities they may enjoy with their friends—like shopping at the mall, going to a movie theater, meeting at a [coffee shop](#) or gathering at a private home in large groups—all are strongly discouraged in a time of social distancing.

That doesn't mean that they need to be cut off from each other completely, however. And social interaction is important. Encourage your teen to stay connected with friends in a way that doesn't increase the risk of infection. For example, many teens are savvy with technology. There are a host of apps that offer easy communication in real time for groups to stay in touch.

If a gathering of two or three people is absolutely necessary, then going for a walk outside in the fresh air—in an area where you will not come in close contact with others, such as a large park—is less risky than meeting inside someone's home. Getting fresh air and exercise also can be a mood booster, which is important for everyone during this time. But it will take some diligence on your teen's part ? and yours ? to keep those get-togethers safe. Check to make sure no one in either family is sick or is showing signs of illness.

Your teen and his or her friend should wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and after their interactions. They need to avoid hugs, handshakes, fist bumps or any other physical contact, and keep space between them. Teens should be reminded to clean their phones and other devices regularly, following manufacturer recommendations.

Transmission within households has been one of the primary drivers of spread in this outbreak. If meeting within a household is felt to be necessary, then disinfection of commonly touched surfaces, such as

countertops and doorknobs is recommended.

Recommendations regarding the COVID-19 pandemic are ever-changing. Stay informed and get your information from a reliable source, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization and Mayo Clinic News Network.

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