

Precautions when living with those at high risk for COVID-19

Summary: Several factors have been identified that confer increased risk of poor outcomes with COVID-19. They include but are not limited to:

- Age over 65 years old
- Immune compromise
- Diabetes
- Lung disease
- Hypertension
- Heart disease

Recently the White House and others have encouraged people with the above conditions to take special precautions to avoid COVID-19 such as social distancing, telework, and other measures. The next question is often about those not at increased risk but who live with the higher risk individuals. This update discusses factors in answering those questions.

Background

As we think about COVID-19 and what the future looks like it becomes apparent that it will be many months until our new normal is determined. Perhaps a vaccine will eradicate the disease or medication will be discovered that offers a cure. Maybe the disease will fade away as immunity in the population increases and/or weather changes or mutations progress or perhaps it will settle into the background with the other colds and flus that we are used to getting on a periodic basis. The uncertainty of the future of COVID-19 is important to consider as we develop our strategies.

Currently, most countries are focusing on “flattening the curve”. That is trying to slow transmission enough so that facilities can give the best care to each individual that needs it. When the curve is not flat, but steep, health care institutions get overwhelmed and patients may die needlessly due to scarce resources such as ventilators. Even if we are successful in flattening the curve the disease will still be out there and threatening our high risk people. Transmission rates will be lower but not close to zero until one of the other outcomes above ensues.

Practically we won't be able to do the extreme social distancing indefinitely for several reasons including economic and cultural factors. Individuals who have high risk for COVID-19 may want to delay the relaxation of their own personal extreme social distancing for longer than the rest of the country. This will involve staying at home and avoiding contact with other people as much as possible, sanitizing things coming in from the outside, practicing good hand hygiene and only touching their face immediately after cleaning their hands.

As nationwide social distancing relaxes, but higher risk people continue to practice strict social distancing, managing contact between lower risk and higher risk persons will need to be considered. This is difficult because a certain small percentage of people are contagious long before they are symptomatic or are contagious even though they never get symptoms. The difficulty is compounded in family relationships. How do we continue strict social distancing in a family?

It is important to realize that despite all our efforts no reasonable method is 100% effective but we can reduce the risk significantly. It would be unwise for anyone to expect that they could eliminate the risk. Therefore, guilt if transmission occurs is misplaced. That's easy to say and rationalize, but not as easy to navigate personally. It would be good practice to talk with a behavioral health counselor about how to go about resolving these issues even before they come up.

Maintaining strict social distancing in families

Ultimately, while people at home remain at risk and other family members continue to interface with the outside world they may want to adopt transmission preventative measures such as those practiced by healthcare workers.

- Maximize telework opportunities in light of conditions at work place.
- Don't share automobiles (or wipe contact points down when transitioning if necessary).
- Don't share phones or keys or other such personal items.
- Don't share bathrooms if possible or at a minimum don't share towels and other personal hygiene items.
- When coming home for the day limit potential for bringing a contagious disease in on personal items.
 - Wipe down briefcases, bags, books or other items.
 - Undress in a garage or laundry area and immediately wash or store those clothes in an area away from others and then shower and dress in home clothes that are less likely to be contaminated.
 - Keep those areas of the house separate as much as possible.
 - Consult with a healthcare professional who is trained in sterile technique for tips on avoiding recontamination during your routine.
- Practice proper cough/sneeze etiquette
- Stay up to date on current developments in the public health area.
- Report concerning illnesses to your healthcare provider.

Each family will need to establish their own rhythm and understanding and develop expectations. Seek help early in working through normal feelings of anxiety and discouragement when living with these difficult measures. Recognize that there will be improvement in the future and that after new habits are developed they will seem second nature.

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