

A funeral, a birthday, 3 deaths: 'Super spreader' events show why social distancing is key

April 10 2020, by Steven Reinberg



They gathered in Chicago to mourn a loved one's passing. But the new coronavirus was lurking among them, leading to a "super spreader" event that sickened 16 and killed three.

It's tragedies like these that have spurred extended stay-at-home orders across the United States along with bans on group gatherings as public health officials struggle to rein in the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Where people are together in settings like a funeral or large family gatherings and someone is introduced into that setting who has symptoms, is sick or has an infection like [coronavirus](#), it can be passed on to others," said Dr. Jennifer Layden, chief medical officer of Chicago's Department of Public Health.

Unfortunately, she's seen it happen. In February, friends and [family members](#) gathered for the funeral of an Illinois man who died of causes unrelated to coronavirus, state health officials report.

Among the attendees: a close friend of the family who had recently traveled out of state and was fighting mild respiratory symptoms. He shared potluck and hugs with other mourners, and then returned three days later for a birthday celebration, still battling respiratory symptoms.

Only later was he tested and diagnosed with COVID-19. By then, he had already passed the [virus](#) to others. In all, 16 were infected. Three died.

The [case study](#) was reported April 8 in the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.

Everyone is susceptible to COVID-19, because this coronavirus is new. It's as contagious as flu, but unlike the flu, no one has vaccine protection from this virus.

Social distancing and avoiding group gatherings effectively reduce spread of the virus, because they deprive it of people to infect and virtually starve it to death, Layden said. But other steps are also important.

"It's not just about staying at home right now, but also practicing those social distancing and hand hygiene measures, and covering your cough, especially if you have symptoms, even within your home," she said.

Though a stay-at-home order may have you feeling a little stir-crazy, it's not yet clear when it will be safe again for people to gather. Only after the number of new infections has been drastically reduced can getting back to normal even be considered, Layden said.

"The first thing is really to see a significant decline in the number of new cases being diagnosed," she said.

That means a drop in the so-called doubling rate—which is how long it takes to double the number of cases, say, from 100 to 200 or 200 to 400.

"Early on, we were seeing a doubling of the cases every two to three days, and now we're closer to every nine to 10 days—that's great," Layden said.

Dr. David Katz, president and founder of the True Health Initiative, said that it's clear that this virus spreads easily from person to person—even when people have no obvious symptoms. Coronavirus is all around us now, he added.

"Equally clear is that this infection represents a life-threatening risk, especially to older people and those with [chronic illness](#), such as heart disease or diabetes," he said.

While the vast majority of coronavirus infections are relatively mild, the United States has no clear guidelines on which of us, if any, may be at low risk, Katz said.

"Until there is such guidance, strict adherence to [social distancing](#) and sheltering in place is extremely important," he said, adding that there's a high likelihood that in any extended gathering, someone will be among those at high risk for severe [infection](#) and death from the virus.

"The best way to show that we are in this together, for now, is by keeping apart, and doing all we can to interrupt the spread of contagion," Katz said.

More information: To learn more about the coronavirus, visit the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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