

# Time spent in public spaces significantly raises risk of contracting respiratory illnesses

April 1 2020, by Rowan Walker

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Credit: Shopping/corona by Alexas Photos Source: Pixabay CC 2.0

Spending time in supermarkets, eating out, socialising and using public transport, as well as being in contact with someone who has a cold, significantly increases the risk of contracting a respiratory illness, according to new UCL research.

The Wellcome-funded study, which is under review in Wellcome Open, is the first to investigate the impact of a range of public activities on the risk of acquiring [respiratory tract infection](#) in a population-based cohort using data from the Flu Watch study.

Professor Andrew Hayward (UCL Collaborative Centre for Inclusive Health and Director, UCL Epidemiology & Health Care), said:

"Common seasonal respiratory viruses and COVID-19 appear to be transmitted in similar ways via droplets containing the virus and direct and indirect contact with infected secretions.

"This research clearly shows that respiratory infections can spread easily in a wide range of public spaces including [public transport](#), shops, restaurants, and places of worship and at parties. Contact with symptomatic people outside the home is also a clear risk."

The Flu Watch cohort is a community study of [respiratory infection](#) occurrence and risk factors which followed households across England and Wales through the winter seasons of 2006/7-2010/11.

At recruitment, participants were asked what activities they had engaged in the week before, such as using public transport, shopping, eating out or going to the cinema or a party or being with someone with a cold outside their house). This data was then used as a baseline assessment.

Each year participants then provided self-reported data on respiratory infections throughout autumn until spring. For this analysis, 626 participants who developed a respiratory [infection](#) were involved and in total 1005 [respiratory illnesses](#) were reported.

Illness diaries included the same series of questions about activities in the week before illness allowing the team to see which activities were

more common in the week before [illness](#) compared to the baseline.

A greater number of people had spent time shopping, traveling on a bus, eating out, going to a party or place of worship or been in a room with someone with a cold before they got ill.

For example, 51% people had been in contact with someone who had a cold in the week before they got ill, compared to 40% people in the week before baseline. 90% had been to the supermarket the week before they got ill compared to 86% a week before baseline and 21% of people had been to a party the week before they got ill compared to 17% a week before baseline.

Professor Hayward added: "These findings support intensive physical distancing and isolation measures in all countries with community transmission of COVID-19 to slow the spread of the virus, save lives and reduce the intense pressure that health services will face."

**More information:** Public activities preceding the onset of acute respiratory infection syndromes in adults in England - implications for the use of social distancing to control pandemic respiratory infections. [osf.io/857u9/](https://osf.io/857u9/)

Provided by University College London

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