Amid pandemic, protest peacefully while staying healthy

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You've watched police brutality protests unfold across America and you

want to take part, but you fear that choice could raise your risk of coronavirus infection. Is there a way to express your outrage without endangering your health?

Yes, say doctors who offer tips on safely joining large protests on the streets of cities across the country.

"During this time when the American public is already mentally stretched thin due to the stresses of COVID-19, the expression of national outrage is a normal and understandable response," said Dr. Steven Siegel, a psychiatrist with Keck Medicine of the University of Southern California (USC).

"During turmoil, as always, it is key that we acknowledge and address all forms of trauma, including the psychological trauma caused by racism," Siegel noted in a USC news release.

Here are some tips for safely protesting during a pandemic:

- Maintain a distance of at least six feet between you and others.
- Regularly sanitize your hands with soap and water, if possible, or hand sanitizer; carry hand sanitizer with you.
- Wear a mask or face covering at all times when you are around people.
- Don't bring unnecessary items with you that you will have to disinfect later.
- Wash clothes and belongings immediately after returning home.

Dr. Neha Nanda is medical director of infection prevention and antimicrobial stewardship for Keck Medicine. She said, "After attending a protest, it is also important to closely monitor your health. Keep a close eye out for symptoms such as a cough, fever or chills, shortness of breath, muscle aches, headaches, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat,

nausea, vomiting or diarrhea. Call your doctor if these symptoms develop."

If you have any lung disease and are exposed to tear gas you should see your doctor or go to the emergency room, said Dr. Richard Castriotta, a pulmonary critical care doctor with Keck.

"Coughing is a normal reaction to tear gas, which clears out the lungs, but people should make sure they separate from others when coughing or around those coughing to avoid the spread of COVID-19," Castriotta said.

Tear gas can also burn the eyes, said ophthalmologist Dr. Kimberly Gokoffski. "The best thing to do if tear gassed is to flush your eye with water for at least 30 minutes," she advised. Make sure the eye is open when doing so, and that water is getting into the eye and under the eyelid. This should be done immediately with bottled water, if at all possible, Gokoffski said in the news release.

Other tips from the experts include: Bring a first-aid kit containing band-aids and antibiotic ointment with you; drink plenty of water to guard against dehydration; and don't be afraid to go to the hospital. Hospitals are safe places and staff there take precautions against the coronavirus.

  More information: Amnesty International has more on safety during protest.