

Mayo Clinic Q&A: Large family reunion may carry some risks for COVID-19 transmission

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DEAR MAYO CLINIC: I was invited to an extended family reunion barbecue this summer and I am torn on whether to attend or not. About

50 people were invited and the event will be held at a state park. Is it safe to attend?

ANSWER: So, that's a great question. This summer is going to be unlike any we've had before, and I know people are trying to make a lot of really difficult decisions about what kinds of activities they might participate in. I think as a general rule of thumb there are four dimensions that we would encourage people to think about as they try and determine the risks associated with participating in certain activities: Time, space, people and place.

If you think about time, shorter activities generally will have a [lower risk](#). With a reunion, it's likely to be a longer event, which would increase the risk. Space refers to how much space you have around you and how much control you have over that space.

A state park with an abundance of space has the potential to lessen risk. We've been recommending 6 feet based on the droplet transmission that COVID-19 is spread by, so if the setting of the reunion allows for attendees to maintain space to limit everyone's exposure, that would lessen the risk.

It will undoubtedly be difficult for people to avoid greetings like hugging or shaking hands with family members they may not have seen in a long time, but those can increase the risk of transmission of infection and should be avoided where possible.

With people, consider how busy the area is. If there's a large crowd, your risk of getting infected is going to be higher than in an area where there are few people. A crowd of 50 people, especially if they have traveled from different parts of the country, could be high risk and gatherings of this size are still prohibited in some states.

Whether or not the people around you are wearing masks is another important factor to pay attention to especially in indoor settings or where physical distancing is difficult. Place refers to whether the activity is taking place inside or outside. We know that transmission is much less likely to occur in outdoor settings.

As for the barbecue part of your gathering, we have no scientific evidence to suggest that the virus is spread through food itself, which is good news. So the risk of getting sick really comes from being in close proximity to others or through touching common surfaces like utensils used for serving food.

That's why as people consider expanding their social circles over the summer, one of the things we're recommending is to pick one or two friends or families that you consistently will spend time with and that you trust are also doing a good job of their own physical distancing rather than doing something like hanging out with a different friend or family every night of the week.

This reduces the risk for all of you in that group, and if someone were to get sick within that group, it would make the number of people exposed much lower as well.

There is likely to be a wide age range of people attending a family reunion. These precautions are especially important to protect the older adults or people with underlying health issues who may be at higher risk of developing severe illness if infected.

Any gathering of this size bringing together people from different areas of the country for a prolonged period of time will carry some risk of transmission of infection. Safer alternatives, like a virtual reunion, should be carefully considered, especially if there are [family members](#) who are high-risk.

If proceeding with an in-person event additional precautions like having all attendees wear a mask, providing easy access to hand hygiene supplies, frequently disinfecting high-touch surfaces, and maintaining physical distancing whenever possible can help to reduce the risks. Invitees should also be advised that if anyone within their household is feeling sick they should not attend.

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