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Planning for the Fall and Winter Holidays in the context of COVID-19.

Many families are used to gathering with larger groups indoors during the holidays which can facilitate spread of the virus. It is well established that private gatherings in homes is a major source of spread of COVID-19. Here is some practical guidance to consider when planning for the holidays and ways to reduce risk if it does not seem feasible to avoid gathering with others. We hope that everyone enjoys the season and stays safe and healthy!

THE MOST EFFECTIVE MEASURES CURRENTLY TO PREVENT SPREAD OF COVID-19 ARE:

- Maintaining social distancing (staying greater than 6 feet from others).
- Avoiding people who are sick with symptoms of COVID-19 or who were recently exposed to or tested positive for COVID-19 within the prior 2 weeks. Those individuals should remain in quarantine per DPH and medical guidelines and should not be socializing with others during that time.
- Wearing a face mask that covers both nose and mouth during social interactions.
- Regular washing of hands; avoiding touching face or eyes.

FACTORS THAT INCREASE RISK OF SPREAD OF COVID-19:

- Smaller indoor spaces without good ventilation.
- Activities that prevent mask wearing around others (e.g. eating).
- Singing/projecting one's voice loudly.
- Greater number of people and amount of contact with others in 2 weeks prior to the event.
- Individual risks of exposures due to employment setting.
- Less effective "masks" (e.g. gaiters/bandannas) or improper use of face/nose coverings.

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Here are some ideas to consider with each phase of planning your event:

TRAVEL

- *Interstate travel:* Many states (including Massachusetts) have regulations regarding visitors or residents arriving from out-of-state. Go to <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-travel-order> to see the most recent update. At the time of this writing, there is a significant daily fine for those found not to be in compliance with the law.
- *Mode of travel:* Travel by car (rather than by air) makes it easier to avoid contact with others before arriving at your destination. Stops along the road should be planned to limit contact with others. Avoid spending time inside restaurants or other buildings – bring your own food. Wear a mask when outside of the car.
- Plan on everyone at your gathering to self-quarantine for 2 weeks prior to the holiday to reduce likelihood of asymptomatic spread of the virus at your event.
- Anyone with a known close exposure to a COVID-19 case should not travel and should remain in self-quarantine for 14 days, regardless of any test result or presence/absence of symptoms.

TESTING CONSIDERATIONS

- A “negative test” DOES NOT rule out the possibility that a person may be carrying and spreading COVID-19. It may provide some level of reassurance however, if that individual is asymptomatic and has not had any known exposures within 2 weeks of the event.
- *Types of tests:* Different types of tests have different levels of “reliability” so it is important to know the type of test being done and the context in which it is being performed.
 - *“Rapid test”* – this term refers to how quickly a result may be available, but does not distinguish which type of test was performed, so it is not a useful term.
 - *“Antigen tests”* – Usually done by nasal swab. Typically faster results (usually same day), less expensive to perform, but have a higher risk of missing an infection in a person without symptoms.
 - *“PCR/molecular test”* – Usually done by nasal swab. More expensive and “turn around time” for results may vary widely (same day to several days). Less likely to miss an infection in a patient without symptoms. A “positive” test may persist however for a significant period of time after an infected patient is no longer a risk of transmitting illness.

- “Antibody test” – blood test which does not have use in determining whether a person currently has an infection. A positive test does not necessarily mean that individual has protection from the disease.
- <https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/coronavirus-testing-basics> is a good source of information about types of tests.
- *Cost/insurance coverage:* Many insurers are not covering the cost of a test if there is not a known medical indication (e.g. symptoms of illness, pre-operative planning, known close COVID-19 exposure). It is important to be aware that places that offer testing may bill you for the service, which can be expensive.
 - As of this writing, Massachusetts DPH is still offering free testing to state residents at several “Stop the Spread” locations in the state. Locations may have different restrictions (ages tested, appointment times), change locations, and have varying timeframes to get results. Residents do not require a referral from a physician. Go to the website: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/stop-the-spread> for more information.

GUESTS

- *Individuals at high risk (advanced age or medical risk factors):* it is not medically advised to attend group gatherings in person. Consider connecting “virtually.”
- *Community considerations:* Consider the data about how active the spread of a disease is in the communities people are traveling from/to. It may not be advisable for people traveling from/to high risk communities to gather. Massachusetts DPH publishes a community risk map weekly on the web at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/community-level-covid-19-data-reporting>.
- *Limit number of people/households:* Currently, a maximum of 10 persons at a private indoor gathering is allowed in Massachusetts. <https://www.mass.gov/doc/covid-19-order-54/download>.
- *Limit duration of the gathering:* Avoid day-long events and set specific start/finish times.

LODGING

- *Out of town guests:* lodging at a local hotel may reduce contact time and therefore may reduce potential exposure more than staying at relative’s home.

DINING

- Serving pre-plated food rather than “buffet style” dining is preferred.

- Space people from different households as far apart as possible (e.g. opposite ends of the table or at multiple tables) to maintain social distancing.
- Request use of masks when not in the act of eating/drinking.
- Limit alcohol consumption.

SETTING/LOCATION

- Use larger rooms with adequate space (6 feet or more) to maintain social distancing.
- Ventilation: outdoors is best if possible; consider opening windows for air exchange.
- Identify bathrooms for guests to use and provide opportunity for regular use of handwashing and/or hand sanitizer.

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