



Enjoying Fall Activities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Always reference local/state health department and CDC guidelines regarding COVID-19 restrictions and/or recommendations in your area.

As we transition into Fall, the leaves change colors and the air gets a bit cooler. With COVID-19 cases rising across the nation you can still enjoy the season, however, Fall activities may look a little different this year due to the pandemic. If you plan to enjoy these outdoor Fall activities, stay with those you are living with or in “your bubble” and avoid mingling with others. Here are some of the activities you can do safely with the appropriate precautions of masking, social distancing, and good hand hygiene. Before planning any activity evaluate your risk by looking at your jurisdictional and neighboring jurisdictions data for disease intensity. You also need to consider if there is an elderly member with co-morbidities and how safe would it be for them to accompany you or you potentially bringing the infection back home.



Visiting an Apple Orchard, Pumpkin Patch or Farm: Visiting a farm to pick apples or going to a pumpkin patch if done with your family or those in “your bubble” can be a very good activity and if done taking necessary precautions can carry minimal or medium risk. This can be done safely by wearing a mask, using gloves if picking fruits or touching objects others might have been in contact with and, maintaining social distancing. The first thing you need to focus on is avoiding crowded areas of the apple orchard, pumpkin patch or corn maze, and only touch items you plan on purchasing. While at the orchard or farm, observe social distancing and wear a face covering to reduce risk. When using a public bathroom be mindful, wear your face covering and wash your hands and use minimal amount of time in there. Carry hand sanitizer and use it frequently if not using gloves. Be careful and wear your face covering upon leaving the orchard or farm area, especially while walking in the fields or partaking in other social activities. If using gloves, don’t forget to properly dispose them by turning them inside out before entering your vehicle. It is always advisable to sanitize your hands after opening the car door before getting into your seat.



Hiking/Walking: These are excellent activities for well-being and, when done by yourself or with members of your household, the contact intensity and number of contacts are very low and considered low risk. When performing these activities with individuals outside of your household, wear a face covering or maintain a social distance greater than 6 feet. If you walk, or hike too close behind someone who sneezes or coughs, you may come into contact with an aerosol cloud that contains the individual’s respiratory droplets. Always carry hand sanitizer so you can clean your hands if you use a bathroom or touch surfaces. However, in groups it is difficult to modify behavior, so it is better to avoid group activities if possible – some of the major marathons have been canceled this year.



Visiting Vineyards: Visiting a vineyard or winery carries medium risk for contact intensity and number of contacts. If going to a vineyard, make sure that you maintain social distancing and wear a face covering when you are not drinking or eating. Sitting outside is ideal to minimize risk and carry your own sanitizing wipes to clean menus or other surfaces before and after use to further reduce the risk of contamination; and make sure that the tables are at least 6 feet apart. Any indoor, group activity carries a higher risk of acquiring COVID-19.



Attending Fall Celebrations – Halloween, Thanksgiving: Before planning a Fall celebration, you should take into consideration the COVID-19 intensity in your community and reference your local/state health department and CDC guidelines. Be cognizant of age, health status, and comfort level of your family and guests. If the data shows the disease count is not declining in your area, or you or someone you have regular contact with is sick – you should reconsider. You should also avoid gatherings if you are caring for, or living with, someone who is in a high-risk category.

The number of people at a gathering makes a difference in terms of your possible level of exposure. Follow state/local orders and keep gatherings small to reduce the risk. If you plan an activity involving food and drinks, it is recommended to be outdoors since you won’t be wearing masks. Have guests go straight to the backyard and check the weather, if there is a chance of rain guests will want to move indoors. If the weather is chilly consider safely using a fire pit or other outdoor heater. Other factors to consider are:

- Duration of the gathering as gatherings that last longer pose a higher risk than shorter gatherings
- Locations attendees are traveling from, same area vs. from different areas, pose a different level of risk. According to the CDC gatherings with attendees who are traveling from different places pose a higher risk than gatherings with attendees

who live in the same area. Higher levels of COVID-19 cases and community spread in the gathering location, or where attendees are coming from, increase the risk of infection and spread among attendees

- Attendee behavior at these gatherings is critical. If the attendees are not adhering to social distancing (staying at least 6 feet apart), mask wearing, hand washing, and other prevention behaviors the risk is higher than gatherings with attendees who are engaging in these preventative behaviors.

Going door-to-door or taking candy from a communal bowl is not advisable this year. Nor are indoor costume parties and haunted houses. Moreover, traveling to rural Fall festivals that aren't in your community if your town has community spread of COVID-19 must be avoided. A number of leading infectious disease experts have suggested that they will not be hosting family that have to travel for Thanksgiving and will do celebrate virtually.

Most important do not forget the following commonsense practices: maintain social distancing, wear a face covering, use hand sanitizer and frequently wash your hands, and place tables/chairs at least six feet apart. Have immediate families sit together and don't allow mixing and no hugs please.



Carving Pumpkins: Carving pumpkins with those you live with the risk is low, and the potential contacts are low. If you plan to do this activity with a group of friends make sure you are all using face coverings, social distancing, and practicing good hand hygiene. Remember, group activities pose an increased risk and it further increases if multiple people who do not reside together are carving the same pumpkin.



Voting: Carrying out your right to vote is an important part of the Democratic process and every state is taking measures to ensure voter safety. Voting my mail is a low risk and eliminates the risk of exposure to large groups. If you're voting in person, please behave the same way you would at the grocery store or another public place, always wear a mask and maintain a 6-foot social distance from the people around you in line. Even if you avoid crowds, you should follow COVID-19 hygienic procedures.



Camping: When camping with those you live with the risk is low, and the potential contacts are low. If you plan to do this activity with a group of friends make sure you are all using face coverings, social distancing, and practicing good hand hygiene. Remember, group activities pose an increased risk and it further increases if multiple people who do not reside together are sharing a tent or cabin. The risk is the highest when a group of campers are not social distanced and are not from the same geographic area – each geographic area has a different disease intensity. Recommend enjoying this Fall's camping with those you live with this year and if in a group stay in that group.

Some additional social distance friendly Fall activities you can enjoy with those you live include:

- Leaf peeping or going on a Fall foliage drive;
- Making smores over a fire pit;
- Outdoor scavenger hunt; and
- Drive-in movies or set-up a "movie theater" in your backyard.

For each of these activities, it is important to consider the number of potential contacts, contact intensity, and the number of cases per capita in your community. Assess your personal health risk before participating in an activity and decide the safest way for you to enjoy the Fall.

We must work together in the fight against COVID-19 to keep our family, friends, and communities safe. Get creative and enjoy the Fall outside – while still respecting social distancing and safety guidelines.

INSIGHTS BY

Rashid A. Chotani, MD, MPH, IEM's Chief Medical Director

Dr. Rashid Chotani has spent over 20 years providing biodefense, infectious disease (with a focus on influenza, coronavirus, zika, Ebola, CCHF, dengue), and public health expertise to public agencies, private industry, academia, and non-profits. He is a recognized expert in medical countermeasure (MCM) development, biosecurity, healthcare management, health surveillance, and the diagnosis of human and zoonotic diseases.