

## **COVID-19: How to Stay Safe During Outdoor Activities**

### **A field guide to getting fresh air during the coronavirus outbreak**

With many states issuing stay-at-home orders and limiting unnecessary travel, you might be wondering if it's still OK to go outside or even visit a local park during the coronavirus pandemic.

The short answer is yes – it's fine to go for a walk or hike outside in noncrowded areas. But there's a few things you'll need to keep in mind. Infectious disease specialist, Frank Esper, MD, discusses what you need to know to stay safe before hitting up your favorite park or trail.

#### **Social distancing is still in effect – even outside**

Unfortunately, going outside is really all we have right now, as most stores, restaurants and other businesses are closed. But we know that being outside is good for us. Nature and fresh air can help us relax and feel less stressed, which most of us could use!

“There's something to be said about squirreling away in our houses for such a long period of time and then seeing people out and about,” says Dr. Esper. “It's nice to actually see people doing normal things like walking a dog, jogging or just taking a baby for a stroll.”

But as nice as it is to physically see people, it's important to remember that the same rules of social distancing that you follow indoors still apply while outdoors. It's also encouraged to stay local if you can. Try visiting parks near your house to limit travel and plan your outings carefully. Think about what locations tend to get crowded and at what times.

Family members or those living in the same household can stay in close proximity at the park. But if you're walking or hiking with neighbors or friends, then you'll need to maintain a minimum of six feet. Also activities involving groups of people or physical contact (like a pickup game of soccer or flag football) are a no-go.

“I've seen some parks that are so crowded that it's almost like an amusement park where you have to wait in line to get on the trail,” says Dr. Esper. “You'll want to avoid being in a situation like that.”

If the park or trails appear to be too crowded and you can't maintain a good social distance from others (or even find a parking spot for that matter!), it's wise to move on or find another time to visit.

Before you go to the park, make sure you've packed water and snacks to avoid having to stop at the store. Try not to use public restrooms and don't touch your face once you're out and about. Wash your hands or use hand sanitizer before and after visiting a park or going outside. It's also a good idea to limit the surfaces you touch – from park benches to trail maps.

### **Check official guidelines often**

"In some areas where there's higher cases of the virus, they have closed down parks just because there were too many people in too small of an acreage," explains Dr. Esper.

It's a good idea to be aware of park closures and do some research before going. Some national parks, beaches and other outdoor areas have been closed to maintain a safe level of social distancing. While in other areas, park entrance fees have been waived to encourage people to get outside and do something rather than being cooped up.

Before heading out, your best bet is to check with your local health officials either by looking online or by calling the park directly to see what the health guidelines are.

Keep in mind – things change quickly. It's important to keep up-to-date on best practices and guidelines so you're well informed.

### **Running & biking outside during coronavirus**

Maybe you've picked up running during the coronavirus outbreak or perhaps you're a veteran cyclist. Whatever your cardio career looks like, you might be wondering if you're putting other people at risk while you're out there huffing and puffing.

The coronavirus spreads primarily through coughing and sneezing. And when someone does this, they're expelling little droplets that can travel about six feet out.

"When you're running, you may be breathing hard, but you're not really getting that type of force out that's going to be able to expel the virus from so far away," says Dr. Esper. "Although there might not be an exact science, the six-foot rule pretty much applies for everybody in every situation – whether you're running, jogging or what have you."

Other tips for runners and cyclists:

- Choose your routes carefully to avoid high traffic areas.
- Try to run or ride on sidewalks or trails and avoid busy roads to reduce the odds of getting in an accident.
- Be mindful about the surfaces you touch when you're out. For instance, use your elbow to touch cross walk buttons instead of your hand.
- Remember to bring your sports water bottle or bag of nuts with you so you don't have to make an unnecessary refueling stop.
- Always stay at least six feet away from other people you might pass, and be sure to give proper notice when passing so you don't catch someone off guard. (Since we all seem to be a little on guard these days to begin with!)
- So go ahead – take the dog for a walk, ride your bike or hit up that running trail you've been meaning to visit. Just remember, we're still in a pandemic and you still need to practice good social distancing, even outside.

*Article Courtesy Cleveland Clinic*