

Understanding Exposure Risks

Learning about how COVID-19 spreads and the factors that can increase or decrease that risk can help you make informed choices.

The questions below are written in past tense to help you assess the likelihood that you were infected when you were around a person with COVID-19. If multiple factors below indicate higher transmission risk, you should follow the steps for [what to do if you are exposed](#). (weblink) You can also ask yourself the same questions, but about future interactions with others, to help you decide what prevention actions to take. If multiple factors below indicate higher transmission risk, you should consider [adding more prevention actions](#). (weblink)

Factors that lower or increase risk of transmission

Length of time: How long were you with the infected person?

Longer exposure time increases the risk of transmission (for example, contact longer than 15 minutes is more likely to result in transmission than two minutes of contact).

Shorter exposure time: graphic of shoppers in grocery store (lower risk)

Medium exposure time: graphic of weightlifting room (moderate risk)

Longer exposure time: graphic of workers in warehouse (higher risk)

Cough or heavy breathing: Was the infected person coughing, singing, shouting, or breathing heavily?

Activities like coughing, singing, shouting, or breathing heavily due to exertion increase the risk of transmission.

Less: graphic of people meditating on yoga mat and listening to headphones (lower risk)

Moderate: graphic of people chatting over coffee on table (moderate risk)

Elevated: graphic of people singing (higher risk)

Symptoms: Did the infected person have symptoms at the time?

Being around people who are symptomatic increases the risk of transmission.

No symptoms: graphic of smiling face (lower risk)

Symptoms: graphic of person coughing droplets out of mouth (higher risk)

Masks: Were you or the infected person or both wearing a [respirator](#) (for example, N95) or high-quality [mask](#)?

If one person was wearing a mask, the risk of transmission is decreased, and if both people were wearing masks, the risk is substantially decreased. Risk is also lower if the mask or respirator is a [type that offers greater protection](#)

Yes, both masked: graphic of masked painting (lower risk)

Only one masked: graphic of unmasked teacher talking to masked student (moderate risk)

Neither masked: graphic of couple, one reads aloud from the recipe book to another (higher risk)

Ventilation and filtration: How well-ventilated was the space?

More outdoor air can decrease the risk of transmission. Being outside would be lower exposure risk than being indoors, even with good ventilation and filtration; both of those options would be lower risk than being indoors with poor ventilation or filtration.

Outdoors: graphic of people cooking over grill and carrying lemonade tray (lower risk)
Well-ventilated indoors: graphic of living room with ceiling fan, window fan, and HEPA filter (moderate risk)
Poorly ventilated indoors: graphic of hazy air in living room (higher risk)

Distance: How close was the infected person to you?
Being closer to someone who is infected with COVID-19 increases the risk of transmission.
Crowded settings can raise your likelihood of being close to someone with COVID-19.

Distant: graphic of people working in cubicle with a separating wall (lower risk)
Moderately close: graphic of people chat over cashier in grocery store (moderate risk)
Very close or touching: graphic of people sitting on couch and touching arm (higher risk)