Yes, You Can Protest During the Pandemic

Gathering in large groups raises the risk of coronavirus transmission, but there are things you can do to protect yourself.

June 12, 2020 By Liz Highleyman

The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the deaths of other Black people at the hands of police have brought out hundreds of thousands of people across the United States and around the world to demand racial justice and an end to police brutality.

Yet many people are concerned that such large gathering could worsen the spread of the new coronavirus that causes COVID-19. Advocates and public health experts have stressed that systemic racism is a health hazard too, and there are harm reduction measures that can reduce transmission risk.

> What public health experts want critics to know about why they support the protests https://t.co/xIP6L1aDTN
>
> — Aisha T. Langford, PhD, MPH. Population health. (@AishaLangford) June 7, 2020

The protests have taken place outdoors, and studies have shown that outdoor transmission of the new virus is uncommon. In general, protesters are making attempts to maintain social distancing—some have even arranged car caravans—but in some situations, it has been impossible to stay the recommended six feet apart.

In addition, many protesters are wearing masks or other face coverings. A growing body of evidence shows that covering the nose and mouth reduces the spread of respiratory droplets that carry the coronavirus. Yelling, chanting and singing can project these droplets further than simply talking or breathing.

While people have tried to keep themselves safe, the police have made this more difficult by shoving or herding protesters together and “kettling” them in confined spaces. In some cities, police have used tear gas or pepper spray, which can trigger coughing and a runny nose and eyes—all of which can facilitate virus transmission. What’s more, some protesters have been arrested, loaded together into police vans and held in jail. Crowded indoor settings present a high transmission risk, and jails and prisons are among the worst COVID-19 hotspots.

Plan to protest? Here are tips to reduce the risk of spreading #COVID19:

✔Wear a face covering

✔Wear eye protection to prevent injury

✔Stay hydrated

✔Use hand sanitizer

✔Don’t yell; use signs & noise makers instead

✔Stick to a small group

✔Keep 6 feet from other groups

— nychealthy (@nycHealthy) May 30, 2020

Advocates and public health experts—including official sources like the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene—have put out harm reduction tips for protesters aimed both at reducing COVID-19 risk and promoting overall health and safety.

Tips for Safer Protesting

- Keep the actions outdoors.
- Wear a mask or bandana that fully covers your nose and mouth.
- Wear eye protection to guard against exposure and injury.
- Avoid wearing contact lenses if you might be exposed to tear gas or pepper spray.
- Stay six feet apart, if possible.

- Stick with a small group to reduce exposure to multiple people.
- Drink plenty of water—and carry extra for flushing out eyes.
- Bring your own water bottle and don't share with others.
- Avoid holding hands, linking arms, hugging and other physical contact.
- Carry and use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Limit yelling, chanting and singing in favor of noisemakers and signs.
- Avoid sharing microphones or megaphones.
- When you get home, wash your hands thoroughly.
- Stay home if you do not feel well or have any COVID-19 symptoms.
- If you're older or have underlying health conditions, consider skipping the protests and showing your support in other ways.

If you've been in a large group with close contact, it's possible that you might have been exposed to the coronavirus. The risk will vary based on your specific activities and how many people have the virus in your local area (known as its prevalence). If you think you have been exposed, consider isolating yourself at home for two weeks afterward. It's especially important to try to stay away from elderly and other vulnerable people who are at higher risk for severe COVID-19.

Most people develop COVID-19 symptoms in about five days, but this can take as long as two weeks. These may include fever, chills, cough, shortness of breath, body aches, sore throat and loss of the sense of taste or smell. Some people never develop symptoms, and it is possible to transmit the virus without symptoms.

Consider getting tested if you think you might have been exposed. San Francisco recently set up a new COVID-19 test site for protesters. A PCR test (usually done using a nasal swab) shows if you have active coronavirus infection. It can take a few days before virus levels are high enough to give a positive test result—so don't get tested on the way home from a protest. Antibody testing (using a blood sample) can show if you have ever been exposed to the virus in the past. It usually takes at couple of weeks before the body produces enough antibodies to test positive.

If protests lead to a rise in new COVID-19 cases, this should become apparent around two weeks later. Many cities have been relaxing their stay-at-home orders and allowing businesses to reopen and social gatherings to resume within the same time frame, so it won't be easy to sort out cause and effect.

Worried about your exposure to the coronavirus during

> Bay Area protests? You can now get a free COVID-19 test in San Francisco. https://t.co/0CeMak7Z6X
>
> — San Francisco Chronicle (@sfchronicle) June 7, 2020

Some people have criticized public health experts for supporting the racial justice protests while opposing other types of gatherings, including religious services and anti-lockdown protests against stay-at-home orders and mandatory business closures.

But "white supremacy is a lethal public health issue that predates and contributes to COVID-19," according to an open letter signed by more than 1,200 people in the medical and public health fields. The group urged police to refrain from using tear gas and other respiratory irritants and not to hold protesters in confined spaces such as police vans or jails.

"Black people are twice as likely to be killed by police compared to white people, but the effects of racism are far more pervasive. Black people suffer from dramatic health disparities in life expectancy, maternal and infant mortality, chronic medical conditions, and outcomes from acute illnesses like myocardial infarction and sepsis," the letter reads.

And COVID-19 is no exception: Black people are more likely to develop the disease and have higher rates of severe illness and death.

"We have been left with no other choice but to resist," Shawnita Sealy-Jefferson, an epidemiologist and professor at Ohio State University, told the Boston Globe. "Yes, there is a risk of the coronavirus being spread at these protests, but that risk is smaller than the risk of us doing nothing and taking the status quo and taking state-sanctioned murder. The status quo has been responsible for anti-Black racism and killing people for 400 years."

In the video below, longtime HIV activist and ACT UP/New York member Peter Staley offers some protest harm reduction advice.

Click here to see all our coverage of the new coronavirus and COVID-19.

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