

How to manage your virus risk

The most effective public health messages don't merely tell people what not to do. They also tell people what they *can* do with only a small amount of risk.

This sometimes feels counterintuitive, because it gives people permission to take some risks, rather than urging maximum safety all the time. In the long run, though, a more realistic approach is [actually the safer one](#), many experts say.

Human beings are social creatures. Most aren't going to sit inside their houses for months on end. And pretending otherwise tends to backfire. It leads people to ignore public health advice and take needlessly big risks. "We need different, more nuanced, and more practical messaging about coronavirus safety," Sarit Golub, a psychology professor at Hunter College, [has written](#).

(Federal officials took a step in this direction this week by [shortening the recommended quarantine period](#) after virus exposure.)

Today, I want to give you a three-step guide to risk minimization. It's based on a Times survey of 700 epidemiologists as well as my conversations with experts and colleagues, like Donald G. McNeil Jr.

1. There is one behavior you should try to eliminate, without exception: Spending time in a confined space (outside your household) where anyone is unmasked.

Don't eat indoors at a restaurant or friend's house. Don't have close, unmasked conversations anywhere, even outdoors. If you must fly, try to not to eat or drink on the plane. If you're going to work, don't have lunch in the same room as colleagues. Group lunches [have led to outbreaks](#) at hospitals and elsewhere.

2. This next set of behaviors is best to minimize if you can't avoid

it: Spending extended time in indoor spaces, even with universal masking.

Masks aren't perfect. If you can work out at home rather than at a gym — or do your job or attend religious services remotely — you're reducing your risk.

3. Now the better news: Several activities are less risky than some people fear.

You don't need to wear a mask when you go for a walk or a jog.

Donald, [who's famously careful](#), bikes without a mask. "I consider keeping six feet distant outdoors more important than wearing a mask," he told me. "If I had a birthday candle in my hand and you're too far away to blow it out, I can't inhale whatever you exhale."

You can also feel OK about doing many errands. About 90 percent of the epidemiologists in our survey have recently visited a grocery store, a pharmacy or another store. Just wear a mask, stay distant from others and wash your hands afterward.

The big picture: I find it helpful to think about the notion of [a personal risk budget](#). I don't spend any of my risk budget on supermarket shopping, because grocery delivery works well for my family. But I do take occasional unmasked, distant walks with one or two friends. They help keep me sane as we head into a long, very hard winter.

For more: The survey of epidemiologists — done by Margot Sanger-Katz, Claire Cain Miller and Quoc Trung Bui of The Times — has much more, [including how they're thinking about a vaccine](#).