

6 feet of social distancing best, but even 3 feet should help: study

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(HealthDay)—"Social distancing" is the watchword for keeping the new coronavirus at bay, but how far apart is enough? Researchers say they may have an answer.

While most [public health officials](#) recommend you put 6 [feet](#) between yourself and others, a new review of 172 studies from 16 countries concluded that keeping 3 feet apart might also protect you to some degree.

And while face masks and eye protection might add even more layers of protection, these precautions aren't 100% foolproof, the researchers added.

Still, the Canadian study found that face masks, eye protection and keeping at least 3 feet away from people gives you the best chance of avoiding infection.

"Our findings are the first to synthesize all direct information on COVID-19, SARS and MERS, and

provide the currently best available evidence on the optimum use of these common and simple interventions to help 'flatten the curve' and inform pandemic response efforts in the community," said study co-author Dr. Holger Schünemann, a professor at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario.

"Governments and the public health community can use our results to give clear advice for community settings and health care workers on these protective measures to reduce infection risk," Schünemann added.

He and his colleagues found that keeping 3 feet or more apart from others was linked with a lower risk of infection, compared with less than 3 feet of distancing. The risk of infection by keeping a distance of 3 feet or more away from the infected individual was 3% versus 13% when the distance was less than 3 feet.

The report was published June 1 in *The Lancet* medical journal.

When it comes to face masks, N95 and other respirator-type masks might confer greater protection from COVID-19 infection for health care workers than simple surgical masks. For the general public, face masks are also associated with protection, even in non-health care settings, the researchers said.

"With respirators such as N95s, surgical masks, and eye protection in short supply, and desperately needed by health care workers on the front lines of treating COVID-19 patients, increasing and repurposing of manufacturing capacity is urgently needed to overcome global shortages," said study co-author Dr. Derek Chu, an assistant professor at McMaster University.

"We also believe that solutions should be found for making [face masks](#) available to the [general public](#),"

Chu said in a journal news release. "However, people must be clear that wearing a mask is not an alternative to physical distancing, [eye protection](#) or basic measures such as hand hygiene, but might add an extra layer of protection."

In an accompanying commentary, Raina MacIntyre, head of the Biosecurity Program at the Kirby Institute at the University of New South Wales in Australia, describes the study as "an important milestone."

"For [health care workers](#) on COVID-19 wards, a respirator should be the minimum standard of care," MacIntyre said. "This study by Chu and colleagues should prompt a review of all guidelines that recommend a medical mask for health workers caring for COVID-19 patients."

The study also offers important guidance on the homemade masks many Americans are wearing, MacIntyre added.

Since the researchers report that respirators and multilayer masks are more protective than single-layer masks, homemade cloth [masks](#) should have "water-resistant fabric, multiple layers and good facial fit," MacIntyre added.

More information: Derek K Chu et al. Physical distancing, face masks, and eye protection to prevent person-to-person transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19: a systematic review and meta-analysis, *The Lancet* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31142-9](#)

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