

# Staying Safe on Campus: College in the Age of COVID-19

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## Michael Klompas, MD

Contributor: Michael Klompas, MD

Michael Klompas, MD, is an infectious disease physician at Brigham and Women's Hospital.

According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, more than 3 in 4 U.S. colleges and universities are planning to bring some or all of their students back to campus this fall. All of these colleges have developed safety measures and precautions to help protect students, faculty and staff from COVID-19.

While these guidelines are designed to keep our campuses safe, they will no doubt dramatically change the college experience. Colleges campuses are defined by face-to-face connection. They involve socializing in dining halls, collaborating in classrooms, meeting new people in dorms and attending sporting events with others.

Reviewing school safety guidelines can help parents and students alike feel better about measures to lower the risk of COVID-19 spread on campus. It's also important for everyone in the college community to work together to help keep campuses healthy and safe for everyone.

## Talking About Safety Guidelines with Young Adults

Around the U.S., news reports have shown that some college-age adults aren't always reliable when it comes to following safety guidelines. They may not wear face masks or practice physical distancing. How do we encourage college students to stay safe by following precautions?

“In my opinion, it's a matter of how we talk to college students,” says Michael Klompas, MD, an infectious disease expert at Brigham and Women's Hospital. “We shouldn't tell young adults ‘you can't do anything’ and demand they stay home. If you're overwhelmingly strict with young people, some may throw caution to the wind, ignore all the rules and do what they want.”

Instead, Dr. Klompas suggests talking with young adults about safety guidelines in an open and supportive way. Recommend safe modifications to their everyday social routines. For example, a student can still interact with their friends. But encourage them to interact

outdoors while wearing a face mask and staying 6 feet apart. Instead of going to a party with dozens of people, suggest that they limit their regular interactions to a small circle of friends.

## **Myths Young People Believe About COVID-19**

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Another reason that college students may not adhere to public health measures is that many young people believe that getting COVID-19 is a milder illness, like having a bad cold. While it's true that young adults are more likely to have a mild case of COVID-19 than others, many young adults have experienced severe illness. Some will require care in a hospital and support from a breathing machine. Some have even died from the disease.

Young adults who don't have COVID-19 symptoms also may be carriers of the virus and they can spread the virus to other people, especially to those who are at a higher risk of severe illness. Dr. Klompas cites the case of a middle-aged patient with COVID-19 who had several risk factors that increased their likelihood for having severe illness from COVID-19.

As such, the patient had been staying at home, limiting contact with others and wearing a mask when leaving the house. The patient's young adult child went to a social gathering, contracted COVID-19, but didn't have symptoms. The virus spread in the home and the patient is now in the hospital with severe respiratory distress.

"This patient is paying the price here," says Dr. Klompas. "Now more than ever, we need to be mindful that our actions affect others in addition to ourselves."

## **Ways to Protect Yourself from COVID-19 on Campus**

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends the following steps that students, faculty and staff can take on campus to stay safe and limit the spread of COVID-19:

### **The basic safety precautions**

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- Stay at least 6 feet apart from others, wherever possible. Physical distancing remains one of the most effective measures for preventing the spread of COVID-19.
- Wear a multilayer cloth face covering in public spaces and common areas.
- Wash your hands frequently for at least 20 seconds using soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use hand sanitizer that contains at least 60 percent alcohol.
- When you go out, bring your face mask, tissues, hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes.
- For students, faculty and staff who are at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19, take advantage of options that limit your risk of exposure to others, such as virtual learning.

- Stay home if you're feeling sick. If a student, faculty or staff member gets sick, they shouldn't return to facilities or in-personal classes until they have met the CDC's criteria to end home isolation.

“The more people with whom you interact on campus and beyond, the greater the chance you will interact with somebody who might be COVID positive,” says Dr. Klompas. “The simplest way to lower your risk of exposure is to minimize the number of people you spend time with. If you're interacting with someone, wear a face mask and maintain physical distance.”

## **Maintain distance wherever possible**

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- Avoid large gatherings where people are close together. That may mean not attending parties, especially when people aren't wearing face coverings. Wherever possible, try to attend virtual group events, gatherings and meetings instead.
- If your school offers distance learning, enroll in online classes to avoid face-to-face interactions. If you're participating in in-classroom learning, many classrooms have modified their layouts to include spaced seating and desks that are 6 feet apart.
- Instead of eating at the dining hall, take advantage of take-out options, if offered. If you go to the dining hall, avoid self-serve stations (like salad bars). If you have access to a kitchen, cook your own meals.
- For any in-person meetings, understand the state or local policies that may relate to group sizes. To reduce the risk of infection spread, limit the group size and limit the attendance of any nonessential visitors.

## **Avoid sharing personal items and food**

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- In your dorm room, avoid sharing personal items (like computers and phones) with roommates or others. If you do share something, clean and disinfect it between use.
- If you go to the dining hall, don't share food, drinks or utensils with other people.
- Avoid placing your cell phone on desks or other high-touch surfaces. Avoid having toiletries touch bathroom surfaces, like placing your toothbrush on a counter surface.

## **Clean surfaces after use**

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Clean and disinfect surfaces that may have been recently touched by others. This includes using a disinfectant wipe to clean your desk after use or surfaces that others may have touched (television remote, doorknobs, etc.).

## **Maintain supplies**

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Stock up on supplies that support healthy hygiene behaviors. These include soap, hand sanitizer (with at least 60 percent alcohol), paper towels, tissues, disinfectant wipes, cloth face coverings and no-touch/foot pedal trash cans.

## **Engage in Respectful Conversations About Safety**

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It's inevitable that bringing students back to college will lead some new infections. Whenever you bring large numbers of people together during a pandemic, the risk of spread increases. This reality is why we need to do everything we can to maintain a safe, healthy environment on our college campuses. This includes having open and respectful conversations with young adults who might resist measures that help protect public safety.

“Try to understand the particular issue a person might have with a safety measure,” says Dr. Klompas. “Is it a matter of education and they haven't heard the right facts yet? Maybe they're feeling isolated and overwhelmed psychologically or emotionally. Perhaps some precautionary measures have hurt them financially. After understanding where someone's coming from, try to address their concerns in a respectful and supportive way.”

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