

This Halloween and the Current State of Affairs

Is It Safe to Trick-or-Treat During the COVID-19 Pandemic? Experts Share Halloween Health Safety Tips. New safety guidelines from CDC health officials rank activities by risk — and a virologist and a researcher weigh in - all from goodhousekeeping.com.

While the novel coronavirus pandemic has interrupted many of our annual traditions, it seems many families are dead-set on celebrating Halloween during quarantine. A recent Harris Poll survey suggests that more than 70% of millennial moms are planning to make “the most” of Halloween with their families, with 80% of all surveyed saying that heading out to trick-or-treat is at the top of their list of things to do on Halloween.

But is trick-or-treating in 2020 safe? Compared to the activities of Halloweens past, like house parties or school dances, trick-or-treating brings a lesser COVID-19 risk for parents to manage, especially for those who are able to head outside to relatively quiet neighborhood streets. But heading outside won't eliminate all of the risks you must consider, as health officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention highlight risk factors that can impede your fun even in the open air.

“In an area where there's still ongoing community spread [and things] haven't gotten to the point where things are opening up again, I don't think trick-or-treating is a great idea,” explains Sandra Kesh, M.D., an infectious disease specialist and the deputy medical director at New York's Westmed Medical Group. “In areas where the community prevalence is lower, I think it's okay to plan to trick-or-treat, but it's going to be a different experience than it was last year.”

Believe it or not, the biggest risk in trick-or-treating may not be the candy you or your kids will be receiving from each of your neighbors: “[Scientists]

have found that most of the surface [bacteria], it's thought to not be the main mode of SARS-CoV-2 transmission... Getting a piece of candy from a house, bringing it home, and then eating it, I think that's less problematic,” Dr. Kesh says.

But we may still have to adapt the way we distribute candy, as CDC officials maintain that having children head door to door comes with the most risk this Halloween. With consideration to families wishing to celebrate the holiday this year, the CDC breaks down activities that carry more risk than other socially-distanced options. These kinds of plans are considered among “higher risk” for Americans:

1. Participating in traditional trick-or-treating where treats are handed to children who go door to door.
2. Having trunk-or-treat where treats are handed out from trunks of cars lined up in large parking lots.
3. Attending crowded costume parties held indoors.
4. Going to an indoor haunted house where people may be crowded together and screaming.
5. Going on hayrides or tractor rides with people who are not in your household.
6. Traveling to a rural fall festival that is not in your community if you live in an area with community spread of COVID-19.

CDC officials say risk can be lowered in a multitude of ways, mainly by keeping activities to your own home or backyard, or in a controlled walk around the neighborhood. Carving pumpkins, decorating your home inside and on the front porch as well as in the backyard, virtual Halloween costume contests, or movie nights at home. The lowest risk comparative to traditional trick-or-treating may be doing a “scavenger hunt where children are given lists of Halloween-themed things to look for while



they walk outdoors from house to house admiring Halloween decorations at a distance.”

The main risks when it comes to trick-or-treating are:

While the CDC offers many different alternatives to traditional trick-or-treating, if you’re still thinking about organizing a trick-or-treat outing, independent health experts say these considerations should be front of mind. The most significant risk may hinge on who you’re actually trick-or-treating with, because close contact is defined as those “who are within six feet of you for more than 10 to 15 minutes,” Dr. Kesh explains.

Joining a big group of trick-or-treaters: Planning to team up with a group of friends to trick-or-treat this Halloween? Know that visiting people from another household or staying close together for hours on end brings with it a risk of transmission, especially in tight quarters where kids can’t keep their masks on (no haunted houses this year!).

Face-to-face exposure: Hopefully, your “trick or treat?” interaction at any given doorway or front porch is very brief, which means there’s less risk here. But the more households you visit, the greater the chance that germs may be spread and linger — especially as others head from door to door, too.

Touching candy, toys, doors and other surfaces: It’s the least concerning risk for parents, as washing your hands frequently (or using hand sanitizer) can prevent little ones from carrying germs home. Parents should be concerned if their child is likely to rub their eyes, pick their nose, or put their fingers in their mouth while out and about with dirty hands.

Other ways to keep your trick-or-treating session safe:

- **Establish ground rules.** “Your child shouldn’t be digging around a candy bowl, touching multiple pieces. Ask them to choose one and stick with it,” Dr. Kesh advises. “And while it’s hard to ask kids not to run around the street, you should ask them to stay as far away from people outside of your household, to continue to do social distancing even outside.”

- **Don’t share props, toys or bowls.** Keep the swords, wands and tiaras from being passed around if you can. Ask each of your children to hold onto their own candy bags.
- **Bring hand sanitizer, and practice not touching your face.** “It’s always good to take a break, do a check in and give kids some hand sanitizer to clean their hands between multiple homes,” Dr. Kesh adds. This is also an opportunity to give kids a break from wearing a mask if they need it, in a safe spot away from others where they can remove their mask with clean hands.

Should I answer the door for trick-or-treaters?

You’re not a holiday grinch if you decide to skip handing out candy this year. “The best thing you can do to reduce your risk is to limit your interaction with others as much as possible,” explains Molly Hyde, MHS, CIC, an infection control practitioner in Maryland-based GBMC Healthcare. “If you are going to hand out candy in person, make sure you are wearing a face covering over your nose and mouth when giving out candy.”

Hyde says COVID-19 risk is lower if the face-to-face interaction is kept short, but you can also wash your hands frequently to ensure you’re not accidentally bringing germs back into your house. It goes without saying that you should also keep all strangers outside of your home, and on your front porch or in your front yard instead. Dr. Kesh adds that at the end of the night, it might be a good idea to disinfect any doorknobs, doorbells, buzzers or other high-touch surfaces outside your home.

Should I use a candy bowl this Halloween?

If you’re anxious about COVID-19, a candy bowl is a perfectly acceptable solution for trick-or-treaters and their hosts. “If you’re at higher risk for severe coronavirus symptoms, I think a candy bowl is the way to go, especially if you live in a high transmission area,” Dr. Kesh explains. As a courtesy to your neighbors, you might consider grouping candy in grab-and-go bags that each visitor can take — it reduces the need for kids to reach into a communal bowl. You can have a bit of fun creating Halloween goodie bags that can be simply left on your porch for visitors to take.