

Information About Social Distancing

Introduction

Social distancing is a term applied to certain actions that are taken by Public Health officials to stop or slow down the spread of a highly contagious disease. The Health Officer has the legal authority to carry out social distancing measures. Since these measures will have considerable impact on our community, any action to start social distancing measures would be coordinated with local agencies such as cities, police departments and schools, as well as with state and federal partners.

The Santa Clara County Public Health Department is the local agency responsible for providing the public with information about social distancing measures. This information is being provided to help you understand what you may be asked to do if the Health Officer puts social distancing measures into practice.

What are social distancing measures?

Social distancing measures are taken to restrict when and where people can gather to stop or slow the spread of infectious diseases. Social distancing measures include limiting large groups of people coming together, closing buildings and canceling events.

Why would social distancing measures be used?

Today, social distancing measures are most often thought about as a way to slow the spread of pandemic influenza. Health experts have looked at past pandemics and found that during the 1957-58 pandemic, the spread of the disease followed public gatherings such as conferences and festivals. And during this pandemic, the highest attack rates were seen in school children, due to their close contact in a crowded setting. Health experts believe that avoiding crowds of people will be important in slowing the spread of pandemic influenza.

Since a pandemic cannot be stopped once it has started, and because health experts do not know how much warning there will be, once pandemic influenza is found in our area, social distancing measures will be used early on to slow the spread of the disease and provide our community with the valuable time needed to be better prepared.

Some examples of social distancing measures that would be conducted during a pandemic include:

- Public and private colleges suspending classes, going to Web-based learning and canceling all large campus meetings and gatherings.
- Public and private libraries modifying their operations and restricting people from gathering by allowing people to come in only to pick up materials that have been reserved or requested on-line or by telephone.
- **Business changing company practices, setting up flexible shift plans, having employees telecommute and canceling any large meetings or conferences.**

Other social distancing measures that would be used during a pandemic include closing all public and private K-12 schools and facilities, closing all childcare centers, community centers, malls and theaters, as well as suspending services at all houses of worship. Additionally, during a pandemic all indoor and outdoor events that attract large crowds would be cancelled. These events include sports events, concerts, parades and festivals. Mass transit systems may also be temporarily closed or be used only for essential travel.

(continued)

Public Health Department

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What other public health actions help limit the spread of disease?

Other public health actions that are used to limit the spread of an infectious disease include isolation and quarantine. Isolation is used when a person is sick and has a contagious infection. The sick person is separated from people who are not sick. People who are isolated may be cared for in hospitals, other healthcare facilities and in their own homes. In most cases isolation is voluntary, but federal, state and local health officials have the power to require the isolation of sick people to protect the general public's health.

When a person is placed in quarantine, they are also separated from others. Even though the person is not sick at the moment, they were exposed to a contagious disease, may still become infectious and then spread the disease to others. Other quarantine measures include restricting travel of those who have been exposed to a contagious disease, and restrictions on people coming or going into a specific area. States have the power to enforce quarantines within their borders.

Both isolation and quarantine may be used by health officials during an influenza pandemic to help slow the spread of the disease.

What can I do?

Even though it may seem simple, practicing good hygiene habits such as washing your hands and covering your cough will help to stop or slow the spread of many diseases. The Santa Clara County Public Health Department Web site (www.sccphd.org) has 'Wash Your Hands' and 'Cover Your Cough' posters you can download and use.

During a pandemic, it will be critical to understand what you may be asked or required to do. It will be important to follow any Public Health social distancing instructions or any other instructions or orders that may be given. So please stay informed and plan ahead. The Web sites listed below can help you prepare for public health emergencies, including the possibility of pandemic influenza.

For health-related questions or concerns, please contact the **Santa Clara County Public Health Department** at **408.885.3980**.

For more information about health issues and emergency preparedness, please visit the following Web sites:

- www.cdc.gov
- www.sccphd.org
- www.pandemicflu.gov
- www.redcross.org
- www.who.int

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