

Information About Social Distancing

Introduction

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

The Santa Clara County Health Officer and the Public Health Department are in charge of providing the public with information about social distancing measures. This information can 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 limit when and where people can gather to stop or slow the spread of contagious diseases. Social distancing measures include stopping 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 get-togethers such as conferences and festivals. During the 1957-58 pandemic, the highest rates of illness were seen in school children because they are so close together in classrooms. Health experts believe that stopping groups of people from coming together will be important in slowing the spread of pandemic influenza.

Since a pandemic cannot be stopped once it has started, when pandemic influenza is first found in our area social distancing measures will be used to slow the spread of the disease. Because health experts do not know how much warning there will be, slowing the spread of the disease will give our community some extra time we need to be better prepared.

Examples of social distancing measures that would be carried out during a pandemic include:

- Closing all public and private K-12 schools and facilities, as well as all childcare centers.
- Canceling all indoor and outdoor events that get large crowds. These events include sports events, concerts, parades and festivals.
- Closing community centers, malls and theaters, as well as postponing services at all places of worship.

During a pandemic, mass transit systems may also be temporarily closed or only be used for necessary travel. Other actions that would be taken include: public and private colleges delaying classes, going to web-based learning, and canceling all large campus meetings and gatherings; public and private libraries changing their operations and stopping people from gathering by only letting people come in to pick up books that have been reserved or requested on-line or by telephone; and businesses changing company practices, setting up flexible shift plans, having employees telecommute, and canceling any large meetings or conferences.

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

Other public health actions that are used to limit the spread of a contagious disease include isolation and quarantine.

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Isolation is used when a person is sick and has a contagious disease. The sick person is separated from people who are not sick. People who are isolated may be cared for in hospitals, other healthcare facilities, or in their own homes. In most cases isolation is voluntary, but federal, state and local health officials have the power to force 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 limiting the travel of those who have been exposed to a contagious disease, and stopping people coming or going into a specific area. States have the power to put into force 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?

It is always important to avoid close contact with people who are sick. Health officials recommend that if you get sick, stay home and away from others as much as possible. Do not go to work sick and do not send sick children to school or day care. This will be even more important during a pandemic.

Even though it may seem simple, practicing good hygiene habits such as washing your hands and covering your cough will help 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 social distancing instructions, or any other instructions or orders given by health officials. 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.

Please remember, while pandemic influenza is likely to be more serious than any other public health emergency, most people who get this disease will survive.

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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