

Should the CDC Change Its Close Contact Definition?

Alyssa Hui | April 14, 2022



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Nearly 86% of COVID-19 infections in the United States are currently from the subvariant Omicron BA.2, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Given the rise of Omicron and the potential for new variants, should current rules and definitions many people have been following—including what it means to come into “close contact” with someone who has COVID-19—change?

In the early stages of the pandemic, the CDC released a definition for what’s considered to be a “close contact” of someone with COVID-19. It’s currently defined as being within 6 feet of a person confirmed or suspected of having COVID-19 for 15 minutes or longer over a 24-hour period.¹

Close contact also includes the 48 hours before the infected person developed symptoms or the date they were tested if they do not have symptoms, Charles Bailey, MD, infectious disease expert at Providence St. Joseph Hospital and Providence Mission Hospital in California, told Verywell.

A CDC spokesperson recently told CNN that the agency was not planning to change the close contact definition “at this time.”

However, with current changes in the pandemic, some health experts are claiming the 6-foot “close contact” rule set at the beginning of the pandemic might be outdated.

Should the Current Definition Of Close Contact Change?

Whether or not the definition changes should be based on what we understand about how COVID-19 is transmitted, particularly with new variants that are more infectious, David Souleles, MPH, director of the COVID-19 Response Team at the University of California, Irvine, told Verywell in an email.

“If there were to be a change, I think it should be based on a thorough review of epidemiological data and studies accumulated over the course of the pandemic,” he said. “The challenge in changing a definition of close contact is both in the characteristics of a particular virus and how it transmits translated into a definition that is reasonably actionable by the public and will result in the best public health protection possible with the least amount of collateral negative impacts.”

Serhat Gumrukcu, MD, PhD, executive director of the Seraph Research Institute and also director of translational research at the Institute, told Verywell that the definition of close contact should be determined by the transmission ability of the virus. “Unless the virus becomes less contagious and there is data showing people within six feet of exposure are not getting infected anymore, which is quite unlikely to happen, there is no reason to change the definition,” Gumrukcu said.

Bailey agreed with the other experts, saying the current definition should remain in place, but if characteristics of a new variant were to be significantly different—especially if it’s “shown to be transmissible over a shorter distance and/or with a shorter duration of contact—then health officials should consider making a change.”

If the definition is updated, it can cause possible confusion among the public and provide unclear messaging, Bailey said. Any significant change could also impact the number of community members or healthcare providers needing to be quarantined after a close contact which can have effects on community function and healthcare staffing.

However, others like Jacqueline Vernarelli, PhD, nutritional epidemiologist and associate professor of public health at Sacred Heart University, believe we’re due for an update considering there’s been more accumulation of science and data on COVID-19 transmission.

“There have been numerous case reports of infection resulting from short-duration exposure (less than 15 minutes) and at a farther distance than six feet, particularly when there is shared air, long exposure time, or in areas of poor ventilation,” Vernarelli said. “The guidelines are based on the initial findings regarding COVID-19 transmission and may not totally or accurately reflect the current situation where we have more highly transmissible variants.”

<https://www.verywellhealth.com/definition-of-close-contact-covid-5225852>