

## If someone has or might have COVID-19, does staying away from other people help stop new infections? How does this affect their mental health?

Summary of Findings up to March 2023

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### Why do we need to know about the effects of keeping away from others?

To help keep COVID-19 from spreading, people should stay away from others when they have it or think they might. People should also do this if they have been near someone else who has COVID-19. This is called going into “quarantine” or “isolation”.

The problem is, staying away from other people is hard. It can keep people from their work and can affect their income. It can also affect people’s mental health. We need to know how long people should stay isolated to reduce new infections, and how this affects their lives. Knowing this can help people make better choices about if they need to stay isolated, and for how long.

### What questions did we want to answer?

We wanted to answer two questions:

- (1) How long should someone stay away from others to help reduce the spread of COVID-19, and;
- (2) How might these measures affect people’s mental health?

### How did we answer these questions?

When scientific studies are done, their results are stored in databases. We searched several of these databases for all the studies we could find on how staying away from others can (1) help control the spread of COVID-19 and (2) affect things like people’s mental health. Our team focused on studies that:

- Compared people who stayed away from others due to COVID-19 with people who did not (or did but only for a distinct length of time); and
- Looked at the spread of COVID-19 and/or looked at changes in people’s mental health.

We then combined all the data across these studies.

### What did we learn?

We found only a small number of studies that looked at how staying away from others due to COVID-19 impacts people’s mental health. Some found that staying away from others due to COVID-19 led to worse mental health, like higher stress. Other studies found no difference. It is likely that staying away from others can affect some people’s mental health, but that the effects may depend on the person.

We also found studies that used virtual world simulations to test the effects of staying away from others due to COVID-19. These found that staying away from others due to COVID-19 can help reduce infections. They also showed that people do not need to stay away for as long if they get tested or are vaccinated for COVID-19, but there was no clear rule for exactly *how* long is long enough.

**Take-away:** Staying away from others can help contain the spread of COVID-19, but the amount of time people stay away from others needs to be balanced with the costs to their mental health. Unfortunately, the currently available studies do not tell us enough about the best amount of time needed to find this balance. We also did not find any good data on the financial impacts of staying away from others.

The currently available studies also had many problems related to quality that is, how they were designed, developed and/or carried out. Better quality research is needed to better answer the questions we tried to answer.

This summary is based on a larger report that can be found at:

[https://www.mcmasterforum.org/docs/default-source/product-documents/living-evidence-syntheses/covid-19-living-evidence-synthesis-13.2---effectiveness-of-quarantine-and-isolation-for-reducing-transmission-of-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=7a4dbf1\\_8](https://www.mcmasterforum.org/docs/default-source/product-documents/living-evidence-syntheses/covid-19-living-evidence-synthesis-13.2---effectiveness-of-quarantine-and-isolation-for-reducing-transmission-of-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=7a4dbf1_8)