



Robert Woolsey <robert@kcaw.org>

As Alaska reopens, precautions still apply but families can slightly expand their social bubbles to feel more connected with others / blog update

2 messages

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As Alaska reopens, precautions still apply but families can slightly expand their social bubbles to feel more connected with others

MAY 15, 2020 — Since March, Alaskans have been making many sacrifices to stay home and keep at least 6 feet away from non-household members. Limiting social contact has had an extremely positive impact on keeping our COVID-19 rates low, allowing hospitals and health care providers to care for those most in need. However, it has also been a lonely and difficult time for many people.

Parents are struggling to work as they also care for their children. Children are missing their friends and the routine of school. Single people or elderly adults may feel even more isolated.

As communities across Alaska are starting to reopen responsibly and certain businesses have opened their doors, families are wondering what that might also mean for social interactions. Should we keep staying 6 feet away from others? Can families and friends start socializing with another family or friend? Can kids play together? Can you go for a hike with your best friend?

“We have worked so well together in Alaska, staying close to home in March and April and keeping our number of infections low,” said Dr. Anne Zink, Alaska’s Chief Medical Officer. “Alaskans acted together and took this seriously, which is why we’ve had such success. We’re in this for the long haul, and we don’t want to undo those hard-earned gains.”

Zink said we are now entering a time when Alaskans have more choices. It will continue to be important for everyone to follow basic precautions and adhere to current state mandates and health guidance. But within those rules, individuals and families can consider their own risk level and make choices that best fit their families as restrictions ease.

The safest option is to continue to limit your contacts only to your immediate household and to stay home as much as possible. Zink realizes, however, that some people may need more social support over the long term.

“We know many people are feeling lonely. They want more social contact or could use some help with child care,” she said. “One choice as we reopen is to slightly expand your social bubble to be more connected with a few close friends or family who help support each other, while continuing to prevent a considerable increase in infections.”

In this Q and A, Zink addresses in more detail how families can make safe choices that meet their own personal needs while protecting others.

As Alaska reopens responsibly, should you still stay 6 feet away from others outside your household?

Yes. Reopening allows us to start returning to some services, like getting haircuts and going to retail stores. It does not, however, mean that you should get close to others the way we did before the pandemic, Zink said.

Reopening the state, phase by phase, will be more likely to continue if Alaska can keep the number of new infections low. And that's more likely to happen if Alaskans can keep following the precautions already in place. That means continuing to maintain at least 6 feet from others to minimize the spread of the disease. It's also important to continue with these other basic precautions:

- Wash your hands often and well with soap and water, for at least 20 seconds. Use hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol if you can't access soap.
- Avoid touching your face, including your mouth, nose and eyes.
- Wear a face covering:
 - When in public and in places that are reopening, such as stores and salons.
 - When exerting yourself through physical activity or passing within 20 feet of others outside.

What else can Alaskans do?

- Minimize your trips out in public, especially if you have regular contact with people who have higher chances for severe illness.
- Continue to work from home when possible. When at work, maintain a 6-foot distance from coworkers and customers.
- Keep a daily journal of anyone you came into close contact with during the day. If you can't recall all of the people you've had 10 minutes or more of in-person contact with during your week, then you are likely having too much contact with others at this time.
- Stay home if you are sick or have been exposed to someone who has COVID-19. Get tested immediately if you are experiencing symptoms.

"The choices that each Alaskan makes during this time will have a big impact on our ability as a whole to keep infections low in Alaska," Zink said. "That means it matters every single time you choose to stay 6 feet away from others outside your household, every time you wear a face covering in a store, and every time you stay home when you are feeling sick. Every single action on your part adds up to us staying healthier as a state."

Zink said taking these steps will remain critical for months to come — particularly until there is a vaccine and effective treatment options for people infected with the virus.

Can we start visiting other families or friends?

Yes, but be cautious. Keep physical distance from others, even close friends, and try to do most of your socializing outdoors where air flow is better and the virus has a harder time spreading. We're entering an ideal time for this now in Alaska, with longer days and warmer weather. But even outdoors, it continues to be important to stay at least 6 feet away from people outside your household.

Can we expand our social bubble to include more people who we interact with in a closer way?

"This is a very interesting question, and one we've been exploring in recent weeks," Zink said. "We're watching other countries like New Zealand and some Canadian provinces try this approach. It's also been explored by [modeling studies](#) in terms of the safest ways to expand your social bubble while still keeping the spread of infection as low as possible."

To minimize the chance of spreading infection, again the safest thing is to keep hunkering down with only your household and minimize public outings. But families, individuals and couples may be feeling lonely and needing more social contact with others. Those households could consider adding one other trusted household to their social bubble, Zink said. Think of this as an expansion of your family. You will have more help and more people to socialize with, and that's a plus. With a bigger family, though, you will have more to keep track of — including how much contact each member has with others.

If you do choose to expand your social bubble, Zink advises keeping your bubble small with the same members over time. She strongly cautions against mixing bubbles. Creating a slightly larger bubble requires a special agreement between households. Members of this new bubble must agree not to join another bubble, because if one person in your group gets the virus, it will likely infect others, too. Everyone within the bubble must agree to follow health and safety precautions, like minimizing interactions outside their bubble and staying at least 6 feet away from people outside the bubble.

Consider your family's needs and those of others when you think about expanding your social bubble. Would it be helpful to include an aunt, uncle and cousins, or another family, to help with child care? Does someone in your family have special needs that would be met by expanding your bubble? Do you have neighbors you want to see more often? Do you need help caring for an elderly parent?

"The idea is to build your bubble so it's mutually beneficial for everyone involved," Zink said. "You have to think carefully about everyone's needs and then selectively connect with just a few others in ways that benefit everyone involved."

Once you've built a slightly expanded bubble, the way you interact with those inside it can loosen up a bit. You don't need to stay 6 feet away from people in your bubble and you don't need to wear face coverings around them. You can invite people in your bubble into your home. You can share a meal. Your kids can play together inside or outside. Adults can socialize with each other, and parents can exchange child care. You can drive together in the same car to go for a hike or bike ride together. In other words, things can feel pretty close to normal within your bubble.

Slightly expanding your social bubble must be done carefully and safely to prevent the spread of infection:

- Keep members of the bubble the same week after week. Don't add or subtract members as you go. One exception to this is if someone in your bubble gets sick. The ill person will need to be quickly isolated and the whole bubble may need to be quarantined, including missing work and being separated from each other.
- Play and socialize in person only within your bubble. Kids can play with a small group of other children in their social bubble, but they still need to limit interaction with and stay 6 feet away from other children outside of their bubble. Adults also shouldn't socialize in close proximity (closer than 6 feet) with members of another social bubble.
- Be careful to protect people inside your bubble. If you are a caregiver for an older parent, a relative or someone else who needs help, you can build your social bubble to include that person. Zink said it's important for people who create bubbles that include members at higher risk for serious illness to keep those bubbles as small as possible. People who are at higher risk for serious illness should not have interaction with anyone who has regular contact with others, such as health care workers or grocery store clerks.

As Alaska reopens, you can slightly expand your social bubble.



Create an agreement with another trusted household for more social support. Keep your bubble small and consistent. Outside your bubble, keep staying 6 feet away from others.

“Having these conversations to build a new social bubble will likely feel awkward, like you're picking a team and some of your closest friends and family won't be on it,” Zink said. “I definitely understand that, but it's something to consider and work through. The focus of these expanded bubbles is to increase your support network if you want to, while still minimizing the chance that someone in your bubble will become infected and spread illness to others. Keeping our bubbles small and consistent is really important to prevent an increase in the number of infections and a stress on our health care providers and hospitals.”

As with all precautions, Alaskans still need to monitor their local guidance in case it requires more restrictions about interacting with others outside their household. For example, if the rules state that you may participate in an activity only with household members, that refers to your actual household, not your expanded social bubble. Please follow the guidance so Alaska can keep moving forward and easing restrictions instead of needing to reinstate them.

Can families visit playgrounds?

Keep checking your local and school district guidance on playgrounds. Some communities and districts have started reopening playgrounds, including the Anchorage School District and Anchorage Parks and Recreation Department. If you are going to use playgrounds, however, your children still need to stay at least 6 feet away from others not in their household or social bubble, and children ages 2 and older should wear a face covering while playing. Playground equipment also will be touched by many people, which could increase the chances of spreading infection. Make sure to thoroughly wash children's hands after touching playground equipment. When soap is not available, use hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol. Supervise young children when they use hand sanitizer to prevent them from swallowing it.

Should we still limit playing or socializing with grandparents, other adults over age 65 or people with medical conditions that put them at higher risk of serious illness?

This has been an incredibly challenging time for grandparents and older adults, as well as their families who want to spend time together. Right now, the safest way to spend time with grandparents and older adults is to do so outdoors, and for grandkids to stay at least 6 feet away from their grandparents, Zink said. Take advantage of these long, warm days and enjoy a visit by sitting at a distance from each other on the deck. Go for a walk together, but stay at least 6 feet apart and wear face coverings if you could pass near others, especially people at higher risk of illness. Continue to have regular visits through phone, email or online apps like FaceTime and Skype. Keeping this distance is most important to protect the health of older Alaskans and others at higher risk for serious illness from COVID-19.

I need a hug. You need a hug. Can that happen with people outside your social bubble?

So many of us are ready to show each other how much we've missed them, but that will have to wait.

"I know it's so hard to refrain from touching your friends. We're social creatures and accustomed to physical interaction," Zink said. "But the more we can keep our distance right now, the better off we will be. Try to find a unique way to say hello to a friend, like an air high five, an air fist bump, an air hug or a special wave or gesture. I've seen people having fun with this, which is inspiring and hopeful. We can find ways to stay close and connected, while refraining from contact."

Stay tuned. Enjoy time with a few more friends and family, but remember this could change.

As health guidance on COVID-19 is shared, we're continually reminded of this message: Stay tuned because things may change. That's still the case. Alaska's health and political leaders are closely watching what happens as we have more contact with others.

Slightly expanded social bubbles are possible right now because the spread of infection is low in Alaska. If the number of infections increases as our contact with others goes up, the state as a whole or individual communities may need to restrict interaction again and return to hunkering down with just family and household members.

"We know it could be many months before we have a trusted vaccine and treatments that work. We need endurance to get through this time, and I know that's hard," Zink said. "When possible, we want to make more options available to Alaskans. We want everyone to be able to get the support they need to stay strong as we continue to cope with COVID-19. It's reasonable now to slightly expand your social circle. Just be sure to keep that group small and consistent and follow precautions that meet the needs of your own unique situation to keep everyone safe."

Keep monitoring [Alaska's COVID-19 webpage](#) and the [Alaska Department of Health and Social Services webpage](#) for updates.

Read the entire [Play Every Day blog online](#).

Play Every Day is a campaign with the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services to help Alaska children grow up at a healthy weight and encourage families to be physically active and choose healthy drinks. For more information, visit www.playeveryday.alaska.gov.

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