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Think Twice Before Planning, Attending Summer Gatherings

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It’s hard to imagine summer without graduations, weddings, class reunions, and other popular and traditional events. Unfortunately, this isn’t just any summer. It’s the Summer of COVID-19.

Although we’ve successfully “flattened the curve” here in Lewis and Clark County, getting together for large events and gatherings can invite the virus right back into our community – especially if we invite friends and family from out of state, where COVID-19 is more rampant.

If we invite older parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles – especially those with underlying medical conditions – they could get seriously sick or even die if they’re exposed to the virus. Is that how we want to remember our special event?

So what’s a person supposed to do?

We realize these are important rites of passage. And we share the disappointment of people everywhere who are having to cancel, postpone, or seriously rethink the events they want to hold.

But we’re also encouraged and impressed by the creative ways people have found to celebrate in new and unique ways, while still protecting health and safety. That’s a welcome sign of resilience in the face of hardship.

In Montana, under the governor’s Phase One reopening strategies, we’ve been told to avoid gathering in groups of more than 10 people unless participants are able to stay at least 6 feet apart throughout the event. So one strategy for summer events is to invite no more than 10 people. If you’re getting married or graduating from high school, consider having a small celebration – or several smaller celebrations.

Here are some other steps you can take to make your event as safe as possible for you and your guests:

Planning Your Event
• Consider postponing your celebration until Phase Two or Three of the governor’s strategy. The restrictions intended to keep our population healthy will eventually be lifted.
• Invite fewer than 10 people. The larger the gathering, the more opportunities there are for person-to-person spread of COVID-19. Or consider having a small gathering now and a larger one later, when the coronavirus has waned.
• Don’t invite people who are in high-risk categories, such as those over age 65 or who have serious pre-existing health conditions. Consider having them join all or part of the event via videoconferencing.
• Use a location big enough that people can physically distance. The virus spreads most easily when people are within 6 feet of one another.
• If you want to invite attendees from out of state, let them know that they’re required to quarantine here for 14 days before they can go out in public. So they’ll either need to come early or attend via videoconference. You might want to see how widespread the disease is at their place of residence. Case maps are available at www.lccountymt.gov/covid-19.
• Avoid having buffets or other self-serve food, including veggie and fruit trays and bowls of chips or nuts. Boxed meals would be a safer alternative.
• Notify attendees that they must stay away if they have any signs of illness on the day of the event.

During Your Event

• Make sure to clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces before your event – and during, if it will last longer than 2 hours.
• Put up signs reminding guests to practice good personal health habits, like washing hands often; covering coughs and sneezes with tissues or sleeves, keeping hands away from eyes, nose, and mouth; and not sharing cups and eating utensils.
• Have hand sanitizer (with at least 60 percent alcohol) on hand in multiple places.
• Make tissues and no-touch disposal receptacles available.
• Discourage handshaking, hugging, and high-fiving. Maybe you can come up with a special touch-free way of greeting that’s unique to your event.
• Strongly encourage the use of cloth face masks. You could even provide some in your wedding or school colors! You can find mask-making instructions at www.lccountymt.gov/covid-19, under the heading “Use Appropriate Face Coverings.”

Attending an Event

• If you’re invited to an event, ask how many others are on the invitation list. If the event isn’t going to meet the governor’s directives for group size or physical distancing, consider sending your regrets. If you arrive and there are far more people than expected, consider leaving.
• If you’re in a high-risk category (over age 65 or have a serious pre-existing medical condition), strongly consider staying home. Perhaps you can arrange to celebrate later.
- Consider staying for only a little while, to minimize your exposure to the virus.
- Comply with hygiene and other expectations posted on signage.
- Try to keep a distance of at least 6 feet from others at the event.
- Wear a cloth mask. Get creative and make one that says “You!”

This will be a summer like no other in the past 100 years. We can see it as a time of adversity and constraint. Or we can see it as a chance to come up with new traditions and new ways of celebrating the special moments in our lives while also protecting those we care about.

One thing for sure, this summer will be unforgettable!