

US CDC plans to reduce quarantine time after potential COVID-19 exposure

Benjamin Mateus
26 November 2020

This week, during the deadliest period of the pandemic since the summer peaks, with a seven-day average of over 1,700 people dying every day from COVID-19 in the United States, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is planning to change its guidelines on quarantine for those exposed to the virus.

The agency is reportedly planning to shorten the time a person spends in quarantine after potential close contact exposure to the virus from two weeks to as little as seven days.

Close contact has been defined as being within six feet of someone with COVID-19 for more than 15 minutes, providing care at home with someone sick with COVID-19, or having direct physical contact with that person's utensils or if they have sneezed or coughed on them.

The CDC's current recommendation for an exposed individual is to stay home for 14 days after their last contact with a person who has COVID-19. They should separate themselves from others, and monitor for symptoms of fever, cough or shortness of breath. Symptoms can appear anywhere from two to 14 days after exposure. Fifty percent of those who become ill will develop symptoms by the sixth day after they are infected, while nine percent after ten days. Only two percent will develop symptoms after 14 days.

People infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus will become contagious before exhibiting symptoms. Even infected asymptomatic individuals can transmit the virus to others. The quarantine guidelines are intended to aid the population in preventing the spread of the disease.

One of the fundamental principles of quarantine is to protect those who have been exposed and intervene early in the course of the disease such that lifesaving

treatments can be instituted early in its course. These persons should have access to immediate health care and be provided with financial, social and psychosocial support as they endure this difficult period. Additionally, if they are the primary breadwinner or care for children, these factors need to be prioritized.

Such ideal conditions are impossible for most of those who will become ill in a country where one in eight report not having enough food to eat in the past week and 12 million are set to lose unemployment insurance the day after Christmas, while millions also face eviction or foreclosure. As the Dow hit a record 30,000, more than 25 percent of the population is either unemployed or unable to earn a living wage.

The incident manager for the COVID-19 response at the CDC, Henry Walke, explained that the new quarantine period would likely be between seven and ten days, including a test to ensure a person is negative for COVID-19. "We do think that the work that we've done, and some of the studies we have and the modeling data that we have, shows that we can with testing shorten quarantines." If the test returns a negative result, "then their probability of going on and developing an infection after that is pretty low." He added, however, that some infections would be missed.

Why is the CDC suddenly changing its recommendations on quarantine when the World Health Organization has stood firm on the two-week timeframe?

Such a shift in established guidelines in the face of the present catastrophe is on par with the repeated political pressures to which the CDC has acquiesced time and time again, from the school reopening guidelines, the testing of asymptomatic individuals and the debacle over the question of the virus' spread through aerosolization.

On every metric, the pandemic is a colossal health disaster in the US, with the seven-day average of daily infections reaching 177,000 and the average of daily deaths climbing sharply. Hospitalizations continue to set daily highs as the numbers approach close to 90,000.

From the beginning, the ruling class has sat back and watched the ripples of the “herd immunity” policy ricochet from one community into another while working feverishly to ensure the stock markets continue their meteoric rise.

The *Wall Street Journal* provided an honest appraisal of why the ruling class is now seeking to restrict the number of days workers must quarantine. “A huge surge in new infections in the US—fueled in part by that same pandemic fatigue—is sending thousands into lengthy quarantines and increasing the burden on public-health agencies to track these people, as well as on *companies confronting large numbers of employees out due to 14-day quarantines.*” [emphasis added]

In October, the CDC told the *Wall Street Journal* that it was looking to allow children who tested negative for the virus after a given number of days to return to school in response to parents’ complaints that the quarantine periods were disruptive to their education. At the time, the CDC spokesman had said, “We are actively working on pursuing data that can help inform that definition and that guidance. At this time, we do not have any clear, concrete science that would result in a change to current recommendations.”

Though the science of the pandemic has not changed, policy is shaped according the whims and dictates of politicians whose underlying purpose is to accommodate the needs of the markets and not the well-being of workers. Now, as the pandemic reaches an ever-greater share of the population, the current guidelines become an inconvenient obstacle which must be circumvented.

Third-quarter GDP increased 38 percent, or \$1.64 trillion, a byproduct of the back-to-work and back-to-school campaigns waged over the last seven months. Deloitte forecasts that holiday retail sales will rise between 1 and 1.5 percent. This amounts to \$1.15 trillion during the months from November to January. Daniel Bachman, Deloitte’s US economic forecaster, told CNBC, “While high unemployment and economic anxiety will weigh on overall retail sales this holiday

season, reduced spending on pandemic-sensitive services such as restaurants and travel may help bolster retail holiday sales somewhat.” This will require workers on the job in factories and warehouses to produce and deliver products in full force.

In a recent JAMA opinion piece, Lawrence Summers and David M. Cutler placed the total cost of the pandemic at more than \$16 trillion, or close to 90 percent of the US’s annual gross domestic product. As they note, “the economic loss is more than twice the total monetary outlay for all the wars the US has fought since September 11, 2001, including those in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.” Every day a worker is not on the line, “business revenue declines.” These financial considerations are the context for the CDC’s latest zigzag.



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