



CDC Expands Definition of “Close Contact for COVID-19 Exposure”

For months, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said a COVID-19 close contact resulted when a person was within 6 feet of someone who tested positive for coronavirus for a 15-minute block of time. Recently, the CDC expanded its definition of “close contact” to encompass repeated shorter periods of exposure to a COVID-19 positive individual that add up to 15 minutes over a 24-hour period.

The definitional change was triggered by a study of a 20-year-old Vermont correctional officer, who was diagnosed with a coronavirus infection in August. The guard had numerous one-minute encounters with six prisoners who eventually were determined to be positive. Although the initial assessment did not suggest that the officer had a close contact exposure, detailed review of video footage identified that the cumulative duration of exposure exceeded 15 minutes.

Additional factors to consider when defining “close contact” include proximity, whether the infected person has symptoms, whether the infected person was likely to generate respiratory aerosols, and environmental factors such as adequacy of ventilation and crowding. A primary purpose of contact tracing is to identify persons with higher risk exposures and therefore higher probabilities of developing infection, which can guide decisions on quarantining and work restrictions.

The CDC continues to advise anyone who has been in “close contact” with a COVID-19 patient to quarantine for two weeks.

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