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Q&A with an emergency room director: What summer activities are risky amid COVID-19?

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Memorial Beach as seen in 2018.

Photo Ray Holley

With the arrival of the summer months and the reopening of certain businesses and activities like dine in and patio dining and beaches and pools, folks may be scratching their heads wondering which summer activities may pose a low risk of exposure to COVID-19, and which may pose a higher risk.



Armed with that question in mind, The Healdsburg Tribune interviewed Healdsburg District Hospital Emergency Room Director, Bruce Deas, to better understand what activities are riskier than others and what steps you can take to help mitigate risk.

Deas prefaced the conversation by saying that he is not an epidemiologist, but that he does have standard medical knowledge as an acting emergency room director.

The Healdsburg Tribune: What is the risk of using a public pool?

Bruce Deas (BD): “One of the key things in all of this is anything that you want to do, you want to go to some place where they have thought through the process and have done whatever they can to make it as safe as possible. For instance, the Park Point Health Club opened the pool there for lap swimming, but not for just horsing around in the pool. If you’re lap swimming, then there is only one person in the lane and you are fairly far apart, but if it is a bunch of kids running around in the pool, then you’re not (far apart). So I think it really depends on what you are doing there. Obviously you can’t wear a mask while you swim, but I think in general, pool swimming is relatively safe.”

Tribune: What about sitting out on a patio at a restaurant dining?

BD: “Again, with measures in place that are appropriately applied, I think that being outdoors is safer. Certainly, you should be in a group of people that live in the same household, you should not be going out with a bunch of people and meeting them for

dinner outside ... to just go and meet people at a restaurant, well that's not so safe.

“In part, what the county has tried to do is if the business was opening they had to also put in a mitigation process and have that approved. You want some place that has thought through those things.”

“The other thing that has to do with it is if you're sitting in some place for a prolonged time. The longer you are in someplace and theoretically exposed, the higher your risk is, but again, outdoor is better if you are at a table and if there is enough spacing in between tables, then I think that's pretty safe.”

Tribune: Right, and then of course you have to have your mask with you and in between eating and drinking you could have that on.

BD: “I get the impression that most people are going to sit at the table and not put a mask on during that time at the table. I think what people are going to do, is they are going to wear a mask to and from the table, or if you get up to go to the bathroom... Of course, your server should wear a mask.”

Tribune: I guess it's the same scenario for outdoor wine tasting too?

BD: “Right, and I would assume the person who's serving the wine is wearing a mask. A typical wine tasting thing is you stand near and you are in conversation with this other person that is not in your household.”

He added that outdoor wine tastings with the safety measures in place can be “Relatively safe-ish,” with an emphasis on the “ish.”

Tribune: What about visiting the river beaches?

BD: “I live in Healdsburg, so of course I see people down at Memorial Beach already and most of the time I see them sitting in groups that are fairly far apart. Being outdoors is really helpful to all of this, because if you get more air exchange you're not likely to get a large dose of virus coming in your way.”

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On the other hand, Deas said he's seen groups of people who are clearly not part of the same household. "Groups of teenage boys running around are clearly not in a family."

Tribune: Obviously right now, vacations are something we can't do, but what about camping? Although I know that Sonoma County Regional Park campsites are closed right now.

BD: "If you think about a campground though, you are at least fairly apart from other people."

Tribune: What about flying? I know it is not time to go out on that leisurely flight, but if for some reason folks had to?

BD: "I wouldn't do it if I could avoid it... And it's not just about the airplane, but getting through the airport... and the way people wear masks is extremely variable. People are taking them off and then they are touching them all the time. The masks I think are clearly helpful, but I don't think people are as bullet proof as they think they are once they have a mask on. The reality is, the masks are to protect others from you and not you from them."

Tribune: What about drive in movies where you can come in with your car — no open air vehicles — and just you and your household sit in your car and watch a movie?

BD: "I assume that they are parking the cars reasonably far apart and not next to each other, so I think that would be pretty safe."

Tribune: Lastly, I know this isn't a summer activity, but I know it's something that folks are really itching to do is to go and get their haircut and go to a salon. I would love to go get a haircut, but I'm also really nervous because I don't know what the risks are.

BD: "I think you need to evaluate what the place is doing. My wife actually went to

get her haircut at a place that gave very specific instructions, you wait in your car until you are called in and they have a time in between so they can clean everything between customers, you have to wear a mask, you have to wash your hands as you go in.”

He said with those measures in place and with being the only person in there along with the hair stylist, that it would be fairly safe, although “the only problem with that is you are in proximity with another person for a period of time and it is hard to distance enough. I feel like the hair cutters are at bigger risk since they have to be with people over and over again through the day.”

Tribune: Any final thoughts?

BD: “The other thing that people are talking about, is how do I go visit my family members? If you are going to go visit somebody on a summer trip and stay at their house, then that one is tough.”

He said it would be better if folks were to visit family by sitting outside on a patio and social distancing with a mask like what you would do at an outdoor restaurant.

“That would be pretty safe. If you were to live at their house then I would think you would want to initially isolate yourself as much as possible before you got there.”

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