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# MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT SHIELDING

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Based on guidance from 6 July for England

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Just over 2 million people in England have been advised that they need to shield because they are extremely vulnerable to the covid-19 virus. Shielding aims to ensure that you do not come into contact with the virus and therefore will not become ill. From 6 July, the Government is changing the shielding advice. Because the number of people in the community who are infected is still falling, they felt it was safe for people who are shielding to increase the amount of contact they have with people, provided they maintain strict social distancing. From 6 July the advice is that you can:

- Go outside for exercise
- Meet in a group of up to 6 people outdoors, including people from different households, while maintaining strict social distancing
- If you are the only adult in your household, form a 'support bubble' with one other household.
- You no longer need to observe social distancing with other members of your household.

It is important to remember that while the risk of contracting the virus has gone down, the risk to you if you do get the virus has not changed. If you are worried about making changes, take it one step at a time. You don't have to do it all at once.

## **So how do you decide if you should go outside?**

No one can answer that question for you, but these are some of the things you might want to think about.

### Should you be shielding?

People are advised to shield because they have one or more of a specific set of conditions which make them extremely vulnerable. They will have been

contacted and informed that they should shield. People over 70 without these conditions do not need to shield. They are advised to be careful about the social distancing rules but can go out in the same way as everyone else.

### How high is your risk?

Not everyone in the shielding group faces the same level of risk. Some were at such high risk that their clinicians contacted them on 1 June and advised them to continue to stay indoors. Some of those who were shielding and become ill with the virus have recovered. Your level of risk will depend on why you were included on the shielding list, but also factors such as your age, other health conditions, etc.

Most people with inflammatory or autoimmune conditions are on the shielding list because of medication they take, not because their condition itself makes them at higher risk. As we get more evidence about the effects of covid-19 we understand more about different levels of risk.

You may feel that you understand your own level of risk. If not, and you are worried about whether it is safe to go out, you might want to speak to your specialist doctor or nurse about this.

### Where will you go?

The reason people who are very vulnerable to the virus were advised to stay at home was that when at home they could not come into contact with a person who had the virus and was infectious. So, when you do go out, choose places where it is going to be easier to stay 2 metres away from other people. If you have not been out for two months you will notice that things may be very different.

- In most places, people are being careful to keep their distance.
- Open spaces like parks are easier for people to keep their distance than narrow paths.
- Some open spaces can get crowded, especially on sunny weekends, so think about avoiding popular locations.
- Early morning and late evening is quieter in most places.
- Could you drive somewhere nearby that would be quieter? In Wales you must stay in your local area.

The other risk is touching surfaces that have been touched by others so avoid routes where this is necessary, for instance gates. Children's playgrounds with equipment may still be closed for this reason.

Many shops have good safety controls in place, but people who are shielding are recommended to stay outdoors and not go into shops.

You might want to find out from someone who is going out what it is like local to you.

Follow all the guidance for everyone about distancing, handwashing, not touching your face, very carefully.

### What would be the benefit of going out?

There are risks to physical and mental health from staying inside for so long. Only you will know how much benefit you will gain from going out. If you have a large garden, have been exercising at home and enjoying socialising over zoom you may make a different decision about the risk of going out than if you have been alone in a small flat.

Don't forget that exercise, even just a walk, is very important for physical and mental health. If you do become ill (with covid-19 or anything else) you will do much better if you have kept up your fitness levels. If you decide not to go out, make sure you are exercising at home. If you are new to exercise you should take it gently at first and build up. Talk to your GP or an exercise professional if you find it difficult, or contact a relevant patient organisation as they will have information about exercise.

Getting outside in the sun can also help you get enough vitamin D which is important for bone health. Always ensure you wear sunscreen when needed and remember that some medication can make you more susceptible to burning.

If you have been very inactive for nine weeks, don't be surprised if you find a walk more difficult than you used to. Build up slowly.

## **How should you decide if you want to meet up with people in other households or form a bubble?**

Shielding can be very isolating. Many people are beginning to have difficulties with remaining separate from close friends and family. If you are struggling with this, meeting up with others in line with the guidance may be worthwhile, even if you are anxious about it.

## Meeting others

From 6 July the guidance recommends that you can meet up with people from other households provided you keep to social distancing and stay outside. Think about who you want to meet up with and where.

- Meet somewhere that will make social distancing easy. A large garden might be easier than a crowded park, for instance.
- Meet people you feel confident will help you keep social distance. Choose people who understand the importance of distancing for you.
- You can meet up to six people, but the larger the group, the harder it is to distance, so maybe start with a smaller group.
- Don't pass things between yourself and others. Don't pass a phone around to share photos, for instance. Take your own cups, plates etc if you are having a picnic.
- Don't worry if you find it stressful. After so long being really strict about not having contact with people, it is bound to feel strange. Try a short meeting first if you are worried.

## Forming a “bubble”

If you are the only adult in your household, you can form a “bubble” with one other household. You must choose one household and stick with them, not keep changing. You will be able to behave as though they are in your household, so you will be able to meet them without having to maintain social distance, stay the night in their house, etc. Think about which household to choose.

What do you most miss about seeing other people? Which household would give you the biggest benefit?

You need to feel confident that the members of this household will follow social distancing when they go out and to be happy with how they are managing keeping themselves safe. Do you want to be sure that they are wearing a mask when they go shopping, for instance? Talk to them about this before deciding.

## Children and young people

The same principles apply for children and young people – understanding the risk of the virus as well as the risks of missing out on vital education and activity from staying at home. Children and young people need to understand their need to exercise in order to maintain good physical and mental health, but they also need to understand how to manage this appropriately. This will depend on the factors outlined above as well as the age of your child. It will be an individual decision for parents, involving a young person appropriately depending on their age. Think about how to explain social distancing to help your child comply for their own health needs and those of their families and friends.

Children who have been advised to shield are not expected to return to school before September and schools should be supporting them to learn at home as much as possible. Children who live in a household with someone who is shielding are only expected to attend school if the school can ensure strict social distancing.

Many children and adolescents are finding many aspects of lock down difficult, confusing, frustrating and stressful. This is very commonly experienced and normal. Although there are a great many benefits from returning to school, exercising outside or meeting up with people, there is no rush to do so, in the end you decide what is right for you and your family.

## Returning to work after 1 August

The Government has said that they will pause shielding from 1 August because infection levels are now so low they believe it is safe to do so. If you have a job and can't work from home you should start talking to your employer about plans for a return to work now, so that appropriate measures can be put in place. Employers are expected to provide a COVID-safe workplace, and you should be offered the safest on-site roles that enable them to maintain social distancing from others. If you feel your workplace is safe, and your employer is happy, there is nothing to stop you returning to work before 1 August if you want to.

## Things to remember

The risk of contracting covid-19 increases the closer you are to others and the longer you spend with them. You don't need to panic if someone walks past quickly and is very briefly close to you. You can turn away from them as they pass so that you are not facing them. This is extremely unlikely to result in you contracting the virus, especially if you are outdoors.

The risk associated with touching surfaces can be reduced by not touching your face while out, washing your hands immediately you get home and wiping anything which you have touched while you were out, such as your phone, bag, walking stick, etc.

If you need to go to hospital or your GP surgery, they will have processes in place to make your visit as safe as possible. If you want to visit a private healthcare practitioner you should talk to them about the fact that you are clinically vulnerable and make sure you are happy with how they will keep you safe.

Shielding guidance is advisory. You don't have to follow it. Some people have been very carefully going outside or meeting people at a distance because they decided it was safe enough for them. You don't have to make changes because it is now deemed safer. You should make an informed decision based on your personal circumstances and understanding of the risks. If you are unsure, talk it through with someone you trust.

Many people are finding aspects of lock down difficult or stressful. If you find this decision stressful, this is normal and there is no rush to go out or meet people, even if in the end you decide it is the right decision for you.

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