

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Is Dining Out Too Risky”

One of the more common pleasures has been dining out. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a cloud over the safety of eating out. Even sitting down at a Cracker Barrel without fear of dying would be nice right about now. But can you do so without risk? And should you? Most of the data says that dining out is really risky and should be done so with caution, if at all. Even outdoor dining is considered risky as it also requires social distancing. You certainly cannot eat with a mask on and we are now told that this is a key component to curtail the spread of the virus. If we can believe it, a recent *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS)* study showed that while social distancing is effective, social distancing combined with mask-wearing is even better. Researchers concluded that “wearing of face masks in public corresponds to the most effective means to prevent interhuman transmission, and this inexpensive practice, in conjunction with simultaneous social distancing, quarantine, and contact tracing, represents the most likely fighting opportunity to stop the COVID-19 pandemic.” Restaurants require air conditioning due to heat generated by stoves and ovens and that is problematic, as reported in a research letter published in *Emerging Infectious Diseases* early in the pandemic. Restaurant’s air conditioning systems exacerbate the droplet transmission from the traveler, carrying viral particles between tables, infecting one or more person(s) at each table. Large droplets, such as those from a cough or sneeze, settle comparatively faster. Aerosolization keeps viral particles aloft longer. All of this indicates that going to Cracker Barrel may mean putting your life at risk. The CDC claims eating a non-homecooked meal can be broken into three different risk profiles as follows: **Lowest Risk:** Drive throughs and takeout; **More Risk:** Outdoor setting with lower capacity and 6 feet of space between tables and **Highest Risk:** Indoor and outdoor dining with normal capacity and no spacing. Can we contract coronavirus from touching chairs, plates, utensils, etc.? Yes, you can but “the primary and most important mode of transmission for COVID-19 is through close contact from person-to-person.” So, contracting the virus from an infected restaurant staffer is a possibility. Staff members should wear a mask, face shield or gloves. With outside dining, there may be fans or other cooling devices. It is possible that the risks are higher in these circumstances, compared to more pure outdoor settings. Yet, it seems like the safest option is outdoor dining.

In the America that I love, we must stop living in fear of COVID-19. But the safest way to support your local restaurants is via takeout or delivery. Please stay informed.

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