



Risks and Benefits While Visiting an Informal Cooling Center

UPDATED September 4, 2020

AUDIENCE: Visitors using informal cooling sites on hot days. Informal cooling sites can be those set up by community based organizations (CBOs), faith based organizations (FBOs), or other organizations. This does not include formal cooling sites that are hosted by the City and County of San Francisco (CCSF) which have specific requirements to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread. For information about formal cooling sites hosted by CCSF, visit: sf72.org. This risk/benefit flyer can be found at sfcdcp.org/covid19 under "Extreme Heat and COVID-19"

This document outlines benefits and risks of informal cooling centers and offers tips on how to reduce COVID-19 risks if you choose to visit an informal cooling center.

San Francisco Health Officer [Order C19-05b prohibits large gatherings during COVID-19](#). However, during an extreme heat event, both formal City cooling centers, and informal residential cooling centers will be allowed and open for you and your household to use.

Benefits associated with informal cooling centers

- Offers the public relief from extreme heat which can cause a variety of heat related illnesses. These illnesses range from heat exhaustion, to heat stroke and possibly death.
- Informal cooling sites may be closer to people's homes which can make it easier for people to use these sites to cool off.
- Although getting together with others outside your household is not generally advised, a change of scenery and being around others (while staying six feet apart and with face coverings on) may help with feelings of loneliness and isolation.
- You may be exposed to fewer people, and for a shorter time by going to an informal cooling center. If an informal cooling center is inside your building or very close by, you may be able to visit it for a short time to cool down quickly, which may reduce the overall time you are exposed to others. If you go to a formal City cooling center, particularly if you must use public transportation or a ride share or taxi to get there and back, you may be exposed to more people.

Risks associated with informal cooling centers and COVID-19

- Informal cooling centers that do not follow the Department of [Public Health Directive](#) on operating safe cooling centers may not be able to improve air flow and ventilation as well as formal cooling centers. Poor air flow in an enclosed room increases the risk of being exposed to COVID-19.
- Use of fans can spread infectious droplets beyond six feet – especially when fans are directly blowing from one person to another. Fans may also be unhelpful during heat. One study has shown that fans may be a risk, particularly for people with heart disease, because they can worsen body temperature when the humidity and heat are both high.



San Francisco Department of Public Health

Alternatives to informal cooling centers

- Go to a formal cooling center hosted by the City and County of San Francisco. Sites can be found at: sf72.org.
- If available, consider visiting an outdoor cooling center that may have misting or other heat evaporative cooling methods. Being outdoors is much safer than being indoors in terms of COVID-19 risk.
- Go to a cooled location such as an open business that is air conditioned or the home of friends or family that is cooled. **In these settings, be especially mindful of the tips to prevent COVID-19, found below.**
- Remain at home, stay hydrated and as cool as possible. **Stay connected!** Make sure you have a buddy who knows how you are doing. If you do not go to a cooling center or cooled location, that decision may need to change for your own safety as temperatures rise and heat stays trapped indoors. When heat exhaustion begins, it can be very hard to make complex decisions and to know when we are in serious danger. If you choose to stay indoors, particularly if you are vulnerable and live alone, set up a regular check-in time with a trusted contact.

Tips to follow to prevent COVID-19 during your visit to an informal cooling center

- Practice social distancing by staying six feet away from others at all times.
- Wear face coverings at all times. Face coverings should cover both nose and mouth.
- If conversing with people outside your household, make sure you stay six feet apart and that you and the other person have face coverings on at all times. If you remove your face covering to drink cooled water or eat, do not talk. Do not shout or sing because these activities can increase the spread of the COVID-19 virus.
- Assess the air flow/ventilation of the cooling center to help you decide the risk:
 - Safer cooling sites have:
 - High ceilings
 - Large space
 - Air exchange systems like HVAC system (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning) that helps air move out of the room or building
 - If the room does not have the characteristics above, how is air being moved around in the room?
 - Safer situations: air is being moved around from ceiling fans (if possible, ceiling fans should be in upward airflow mode), open windows, and/or window AC units
 - Unsafe situations: a small room with no air movement, a room with floor or desk fans blowing directly at people

For detailed information on setting up safe cooling centers, please refer to [Health Directive 2020-25](#).