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CDC Expands Definition of “Close Contact”

On October 21, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued new guidance that broadens the number of individuals considered at risk of contracting COVID-19 by significantly expanding the definition of who is in “close contact” with an infected person.

Previously, “close contact” was defined as an individual who spent **at least 15 consecutive minutes** within 6 feet of an infected person. The revised guidance now defines “close contact” as “someone who was within 6 feet of an infected person for a **cumulative total of 15 minutes or more** over a 24-hour period starting from 2 days before illness onset (or, for asymptomatic patients, 2 days prior to test specimen collection) until the time the patient is isolated” (emphasis added). The CDC explained that individual exposures added together over a 24-hour period (e.g., three 5-minute exposures for a total of 15 minutes) would be captured under this new definition.

This broader definition most likely will have a big impact on schools, hospitals, and workplaces where individuals have several separate interactions with others (totaling 15 minutes or more) over the course of a day. The initial standard (at least 15 consecutive minutes) was simple to determine for most individuals. “Were you near Thelma for that extended block of time?” is an easy question to answer. The new standard (15 minutes in the aggregate) will trigger more imprecise guesswork because very few people (without a stopwatch) can state, to a reasonable degree of certainty, that they had contact with Louise for a total of 15 minutes in any 24-hour period.

Best advice going forward? Revise your current policies and forms based on the new definition of “close contact” and ... wear a mask.

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