

Large Events in 2021 Will Look Different

Spring is here, which means summer is also right around the corner. More than a year after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic – and with the development of three effective and safe vaccines – people are more eager than ever to get out and socialize. Postponed weddings are getting rescheduled, Major League Baseball (MLB) fields are opening, kids are dusting off their spring and summer sports gear, and holidays like Memorial Day and Independence Day are soon approaching. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently released guidance for safely hosting and attending large-scale events.

Dr. Kashif Zaheer, director of the OSF Medical Group in the metro region, offers advice on continuing safety precautions as warm weather approaches and large events begin to appear on your 2021 calendars.

“This is the time of year – from now until the fall – when a lot of outdoor events can happen, including weddings, graduation parties, sporting events, parades. And large events have the highest risk for transmission of disease – very rapidly, too,” says Dr. Zaheer.

While the planning has begun for some of the first larger scale events since pre-COVID times, the pandemic is not yet over. Although there are now vaccines available, new strains of the disease are emerging – and Dr. Zaheer says to heed caution and keep this in mind when planning or attending an event.

“There are emerging new variants and we can see that the variants are significantly impacting even those who have received the COVID vaccine – so we do not yet understand how the variants will affect us,” Dr. Zaheer cautions.

Whether you are rescheduling a postponed or canceled event, attending an event, or planning a new event, there are things that need to be considered before proceeding in 2021.

“Specific recommendations would be to consider how big of a gathering it will be. What would be the risk associated with those gatherings be? How do we maintain a healthy environment? How do we communicate any precautions with the people who are going to be attendees,” advises Dr. Zaheer.

According to the CDC, the things to consider before hosting a large-scale event include the number of COVID-19 cases in your community, exposure to COVID-19 during travel, setting and length of the event, number of people, and behavior of attendees.

“Keep in mind that the key is the event planners for gatherings should connect with state and local officials to plan really deliberately how the event will go. Sometimes there could be exposure to the virus at the event – how do we follow up with those exposures after the event? During the event, how are they going to communicate with people attending in regards to reminding them of social distancing? Such as putting up large banners and frequent announcements throughout the event to maintain distancing, masking, and all those,” Dr. Zaheer says.

In order to keep guests safe and reduce the risk of turning the event into a “super spreader,” it is recommended to follow these guidelines in addition to offering plenty of hand sanitizer and extra face masks for people who forget or lose their mask. Additionally, setting up a contact tracing log for guests can help track down attendees, if significant COVID-19 exposure does occur.

Most importantly, be sure to check with both state and local guidance before attending an event this year – and continue to wear your mask, watch your distance, wash your hands, and get vaccinated when you are eligible.