

The Absolute Risk of Thanksgiving Dinner*

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Andrew Cuomo says I should stay home for Thanksgiving, but I am thinking of coming to New York City anyway. With Covid, at least, finding out what Andrew Cuomo recommends and doing the opposite has been a pretty good rule of thumb so far.

Still, I don't want to get sick and I don't want my family to get sick either. So armed with Google, Twitter and 30 years of medical experience (as an orthopedic surgeon, but still), I aimed to discover the truth.

My plan was to read everything I could find. I set out to discover the odds of getting sick from making this trip. I did not get far.

The reporting on Covid risk is rich in adjectives, but poor in numbers. Experts will tell you that going home for the holidays is foolish, dangerous and selfish. What they won't tell you is a number that measures just how foolish, dangerous and selfish this would be. "Travel increases your chances of getting and spreading COVID-19", was, for example, the CDC's unmeasured and thus unhelpful contribution to the discussion.

And yet advice abounds on how people can reduce their Thanksgiving risk. Wear a mask. Keep the windows open. Limit the shouting around the dinner table.

This makes little sense. Risk reduction strategies can be justified only if you know how

much you are buying for your efforts. It's not enough to say your risks are "lower", or even "very, very lower". You need to know how much lower they are, in absolute terms.

For example, although I could cut my risk of a heart attack by about 20% by using a statin to cut my cholesterol level, I won't do that. The absolute gains are too small. The Framingham Heart Disease Risk Calculator reveals that cutting my cholesterol to the lower bound of normal will reduce my annual risk of a heart attack from 0.78% to 0.63%. This 0.15% absolute risk reduction –about one in seven hundred– is, to me, just not worth the price, hassle and risk of taking a pill every day.

Similarly, while it stands to reason that socially distancing by 6 feet and not 3 might cut the risk of viral transmission by half or more, it's not clear that this is a smart strategy. The absolute reduction might be minuscule. We don't know because we're not told. Moreover, adopting the larger distance standard might also reduce the seating capacity of a restaurant just enough to drive it out of business.

Governor Cuomo doesn't seem to consider absolute risk reduction and its costs, and he doesn't want us to do so either. Accordingly, we have a Framingham Heart Disease Risk Calculator but no such tool for Covid.

A person shown a hard number measuring his or her risk might stay home. On the other hand, such a person might choose not only to attend Thanksgiving dinner without a mask but to keep the windows closed and shout at Uncle Bobby when he deserves it. That person might

try to offset the risk by, say, quarantining the week before (just as one might balance too much dessert at Thanksgiving by crash dieting before the holiday). A person also might conclude that the risks are small enough to bear without modification. These are all valid choices.

People deprived of accurate measurements regarding the true hazards of going to Thanksgiving dinner –or participating in any other activity– are people unable to make free and informed choices.

Interestingly, medicine itself has gone the other way. Doctors and patients are encouraged to engage in so-called shared decision making. Obtaining consent for treatment has rightly moved from "I recommend you do this; sign here, please" to a full discussion of the risks and benefits of all treatment alternatives. The final decisions are made by patients after considering their own preferences and values.

A scientific study showing that ankle fractures heal faster and more reliably with surgery than with treatment in a cast, for instance, does not give me license to operate. Rather, I must confirm that the value of a specific amount of faster and more reliable healing exceeds the perceived costs and burdens of surgery. That is, I don't just "listen to the science", I must listen to the patient.

By instructing me to stay home without providing full information, Andrew Cuomo and his ilk are not just blocking me from the party. They are, in effect, saying that rational decision making has no seat at the table this year as well.

* This essay was written on 11/12/2020 and rejected then by the WSJ.