

Dating is back on the menu – but from face masks to sex, what are the new rules?

Restrictions on socialising have eased, so how can singletons successfully navigate the new and strange dating landscape?

By [Morgan Lawrence](#)
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Singletons can meet up in person again, but what is the best way to navigate post-lockdown dating? | CREDIT: iStockPhoto

Singletons rejoice! From this week, pandemic restrictions in England loosened to allow outdoor socialising with "one other person, or with your household or support bubble" as part of the Government's road map out of lockdown.

Among other things, this is a small victory for those who've been longing to return to in-person dating.

The Government advises that outdoor meet-ups can include a "drink or picnic", but you must continue to maintain a social distance from those outside your household. This presents more than a few tricky obstacles for those on the hunt for love, who are now faced with yet another month of walking in parks where privacy is hard to find.

"Let's ogle each other by the bar" dates are off the cards for the foreseeable future too. Restaurants and bars will remain shuttered until April 12, when the hospitality industry can re-open outdoor areas and pub gardens to the public.

And once re-opened, you'll be lucky to grab a space. Some restaurants and pubs, like Water Lane Boathouse in Leeds, which has a large beer garden overlooking the Leeds Liverpool Canal, saw more than 700 bookings in just five hours.

In a recent survey, dating app [Hinge](#) revealed that 79 per cent of its users said it is important to agree on pandemic safety habits with a match before going on an in-person date. This includes stating whether you're open to socially distanced dates or dating with a mask.

So how can singletons navigate this new (and frankly strange) dating landscape? We asked the dating experts.

To mask or not to mask

According to a recent survey from [AdultFriendFinder](#), women are 30 per cent more likely to wear a face mask on a first date during the pandemic compared to men. Age was also a contributing factor; people under 30 are three times more likely to wear a mask on a date than those over 50.

27-year-old Emma Brown, a sales associate from Birmingham, went on many pre-lockdown dates wearing a mask. "My dates and I walked around the local park," she says. "I always wore my mask as I still live with my mum and didn't want to put her at risk." Some dates, Brown suggests, didn't react well. "They were under the impression that if we were out in the fresh air there was no risk. One guy kept joking that I was being over-dramatic."

While it's true that muffled speech through a piece of fabric isn't exactly sexy (unless that's your thing), thankfully there are some ways to keep the conversation flowing – and yourself safe – while dating with a mask on.

Psychologist and founder of [Franchise Relationships](#) Greg Nathan writes: "When wearing a mask, the superficial social smile will no longer cut it. If you are going to smile at someone, think about why you're genuinely glad to see them.

"This will remind your brain to trigger the Duchenne Smile [a movement characterised by the zygomaticus major muscle lifting the corners of your mouth at the same time the orbicularis oculi muscles lift your cheeks]."

Nathan suggests that tilting the head is a good move, too. "Tilting the head slightly is also a universal sign of curiosity and interest. I learned this one from my dog, Leo."

Where you can meet

Since March 8, meeting up socially outdoors with one other person outside of your household is allowed. Luckily, we're on the cusp of spring and, though it might be a little too chilly to clink glasses of champers in the park wearing a t-shirt, you can embrace the weather by wrapping up warm and taking a picnic on a socially-distanced date.

On the subject of picnicking on park benches, Telegraph food columnist Xanthe Clay advises: "Cooler-weather picnics demand something warming, such as a quickly made pie, hot from the oven. Or soup: we may not be able to actually hug, but it's true when they say that a steaming mug is the next best thing."

Her [picnic recipes designed to serve two](#) include chicken pittas, soup, beef and blue cheese pastries and crunch savoury seed crackers. You know what they say: a shared meal binds people together.

For [Kate Mansfield](#), dating coach and relationship expert, the slow-paced approach to dates (now walking in parks and picnics) hold the charm of the Austen era. To have a successful park date, Mansfield says:

"First of all, it's about lowering expectations to some extent. I've always said low expectations and high standards and not the other way around. Covid-19 has slowed down the dating process – stop expecting an incredible connection in a cold park. It's going to take longer, and that's not a bad thing."

Mansfield also suggests that having socially-distanced dates, and wearing a mask, makes having difficult conversations easier. "There is that distance and we don't feel as vulnerable," she says. "So, I think it really can be used as an opportunity to change your strategy and focus on what's really important."

Challenging conversations

Logan Ury, behavioural scientist turned dating coach, and the author of [How To Not Die Alone](#), says: "Talk to your [dating app] matches about your preferences: clear communication, especially around challenging topics, is crucial for building a meaningful relationship. Successful couples know how to navigate hard conversations."

Ury is the director of relationship science at dating app Hinge and, earlier this month, she and her team launched Safe Dating Preferences within the app. The brand-new feature gives singletons a direct way to express what kind of dates they're comfortable going on, from wearing a mask to virtual dating.

And it couldn't have come at a better time, a recent survey for Hinge revealed that the most important thing for 41 per cent of its users is to know how a match had been handling pandemic guidelines before they meet in person.

"Yeah, it's awkward at first," says Brown. "But I speak with my dating app matches about the pandemic before I meet them. If they've been going to secret raves, partying it up while their family lives in fear at home, it says a lot about their personality. Mainly, the fact that they're a bit of a d--k."

Sex

[The Terrence Higgins Trust](#) raised eyebrows in August by suggesting people avoid kissing, wear a face covering and choose positions that aren't face-to-face during sex (time to dust off the Kama Sutra).

"Your best sexual partner during the Covid-19 pandemic is yourself [yawn] or someone within your household and you should follow the government guidelines about social distancing, hand washing and face coverings," said the Trust. "However, it's unrealistic to ask everyone to abstain from sex indefinitely."

For [Sami Wunder](#), dating expert and coach, the intimacy issue is all about accountability. "If two people are honest with each other about their levels of exposure, and the precautions they have been taking, trusting in that information is the best option for the mental health of both parties," she says.

"The virus can still spread, even with the best intentions, but that is a risk that we all face – even when we go shopping for groceries in the supermarket – so, as long as both parties are doing their best to keep safe, it's okay in my opinion to move towards natural physical intimacy."

There is an upside to taking it slow with potential partners, though. "My standard recommendation to clients is to take it slow with sex, always," says Wunder. "Having sex too quickly can often cloud our judgement; it can make us miss the red flags; and get attached too quickly to someone who may not be the best long term match for us."

Virtual dates

"Video dates are the new coffee dates," says Ury. "They serve as a safe, low-pressure way to connect with a [dating app] match and get a vibe-check of your compatibility. Video dates can help you confidently decide who you want to take the next step with and meet in-person."

Mansfield also prefers [video dates](#) for her clients. "You do need to meet up with people in person eventually. But video dating gives people time to slow down and actually realise what they want from a potential partner. Often we lean on physical attraction and avoid asking those difficult questions because it can feel uncomfortable."



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