

# Protecting Yourself Against Coronavirus

If you've been following news on the spread of coronavirus, a strain of infectious respiratory illnesses that is now formally being called COVID-19 by medical professionals, concern for your family's health may not have kicked in until recently. After a slow-but-steady spread from China throughout Asia and into European countries like Italy, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention made an announcement to the American public earlier this week that the new strain of the virus will eventually spread in the United States, immediately following another announcement that a local resident in California contracted the disease without traveling abroad. Even if you live thousands of miles away from California or hundreds of miles away from a major city, you might find yourself wondering what this means for your community.

**First, take a deep breath:** The uptick of interest in coronavirus has surged in the last two weeks (nearly four times the amount of searches on Google since Valentine's Day) leading to what feels like a pandemonium of unbalanced commentary on the health risks associated with COVID-19. According to an early study conducted in China that was just published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, upwards of 85% of infected people only suffered mild symptoms that aren't too unlike the flu, including fever and cough. And while the study reports that 1 in 100 people died from the infection, health experts believe that this statistic could be drastically smaller with new data collected from international markets — plus, these deaths were reported more often in people over the age of 85 and for those who had pre-existing health conditions like heart disease or diabetes.

It may be too soon to tell how virulent COVID-19 could truly be for most Americans, especially since we're in the midst of flu season where other viral infections can easily spread. But there's one thing we know for sure: It's possible the virus could largely impact some Americans' day-to-day schedules in the near future. If you're traveling — abroad, certainly, but even domestically — you may have already started to prepare for a cancellation, but the truth is that work and school schedules may also be interrupted, and public services and goods may also be impacted in the following weeks.

We've pulled together a panel of leading health experts from different disciplines who have all been closely following the spread of coronavirus worldwide; each have direct experience in treating or studying viral illnesses. Here's what you can do to prepare your family for a potential coronavirus outbreak as well as exposure to influenza or other viral infections, according to experts.

## **It doesn't hurt to stock up on groceries and medicine.**

You may have already heard advice that you should buy up to a two-week supply of everything you normally use in the house. John Lednicky, PhD, a microbiology and virology research professor within the University of Florida's College of Public Health and Health Professions, explains that the recommendation stems from the fact that your community could be quarantined if multiple cases of coronavirus pop up, which could keep you from reaching pharmacies and grocery stores. But don't go crazy trying to chase down every single can of tuna or pallets of fresh water. While it's always good to gradually try and stock up on necessary toiletries, an ample supply of water, shelf-stable food, batteries, and necessary medications, quarantines aren't immediate needs, and you should expect that local supplies of food won't be totally interrupted all at once, but possibly over time.

## **When you're at the store, you should skip the wipes, and get some bleach.**

According to Robyn Gershon, MHS, DrPH, a clinical professor of epidemiology at New York University's School of Global Public Health, herbal-based cleaners haven't been shown effective against neutralizing COVID-19 on common surfaces. If you're heading out to buy cleaners and other disinfectants to keep your spaces germ-free, you may be best off buying a gallon of household-friendly bleach, Gershon says, as you'll need to frequently disinfect highly-trafficked areas of the house during flu season (think: toilet seats, door handles, railings, and sink faucet handles).



Many common disinfectant products, including picks like wipes and sprays, need to stay wet on a dirty surface for a certain amount of time to actually be effective, says Carolyn Forte, Director of the Good Housekeeping Institute Cleaning Lab. "If you're using it for a matter of seconds, it's not going to work. You'll want to use another cleaner in this case." **Lysol sprays**, for example, can sanitize a surface in as little as 10 seconds, according to the product's instructions; but in order to fully disinfect a surface, however, Forte says the manufacturer requires you to "leave the surface visibly wet" with Lysol for at least 4 minutes.

Depending on how many people live in your home, and whether or not they're sick in the first place, you may need to change tactics from simply sanitizing something to fully disinfecting with bleach or other strong cleaning agents.

### **You probably don't need to be wearing a face mask.**

Surgical masks that you can buy in most superstores or online won't totally keep you safe from getting sick. **In fact, people who are already sick should be the only ones wearing them**, says Dr. Jonathan Fielding, MD, a distinguished professor of health policy and management at the University of California Los Angeles' Schools of Public Health and Medicine. Dr. Fielding explains that high-quality respiratory face masks (known as N95 masks by health professionals) are much different than other options currently being used by everyday people. These special masks are often reserved for doctors, and those doctors usually undergo special fitting sessions to ensure they're as effective as possible.



The CDC recommends that people who have respiratory symptoms wear them to prevent others from getting sick, as face masks may help stem some bacteria, especially in confined spaces (wearing them outside won't do you any favors!). "These are hard to wear all the time, especially, one could imagine, if you are sick, so the best thing to do is to keep this potentially infected household member as isolated from the rest of the household as possible," Gershon says. "But when entering their room, say for instance, to change linens or to help them wash up, then both of you should wear a face mask."

### **Take note of the areas the CDC has identified as high risk.**

Travel abroad is largely being discouraged by cautious health professionals, and the CDC has released official recommendations to cancel travel to mainland China and South Korea, and has issued travel alerts for those with chronic illnesses to avoid Italy, Iran, and Japan. While many airlines are already limiting routes and working with travelers to issue refunds, you may want to check in with cruise providers or any other local tourism attractions in the next few months to discuss any possible cancellations.

More locally, though, you'll want to avoid public places only if there's been an uptick in coronavirus activity in your area; health officials recommend simply avoiding close contact with others if sickness has become apparent in your community. Places like public parks, grocery stores, movie theaters, libraries, and shopping malls could up your individual risk for exposure. "Stay at least six feet away from a person with respiratory symptoms," Fielding says. "Don't touch your eyes, nose, or mouth with your fingers and cover your mouth for a cough and your nose for a sneeze."

### **Use your best judgement about staying home from work or keeping the kids out of school.**

If you're wondering if you should keep your children home, Dr. Saskia Popescu, PhD, MPH, MA, CIC, a hospital epidemiologist and infection preventionist at Phoenix Children's Hospital, says that kids should be kept home only if they're sick — a local uptick in COVID-19 may result in your local school district closing down regardless. *"I encourage children to use the same prevention strategies for respiratory virus season: **make sure they're washing with soap and water for 20 seconds**, or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer,"*

Popescu says. "Plus, teach them coughing and sneezing etiquette, as covering and coughing/sneezing into your elbow is ideal, which you can teach as a 'Count Dracula' approach."

Some employees may be asked to work from home in a preemptive quarantine if they've traveled abroad recently. But if you're truly worried about contracting a virus at work, the best thing you can do is work on your own immune system. Popescu and other experts say that it's not too late to get a flu shot, which may help lessen the hold that any virus (coronavirus or another respiratory illness) has on you later down the road. And remember, washing your hands is very important.

### **Safeguarding your own immune system is key here, says NYU's Gershon.**

"Start practicing good hand hygiene now and ramp it up. In addition to washing your hands after using the bathroom (at home or work), wash your hands: before eating; after touching used tissues; after coming in from crowded areas, such as mass transit; before bedtime; before applying make-up; before and after handling contact lens, or pretty much anytime you have been or will be in contact with your mucus membranes, which are your eyes, mouth, and inside the nose."



Currently, health experts aren't aware if COVID-19 can be transmitted through **blood, feces, vomit, urine, or breast milk**, Gershon says. "But to be careful, **best to protect yourself from contaminating yourself with these fluids...** and wash your hands immediately if you do come in contact with other body fluids."

### **Pay attention to your symptoms if you feel sick.**

If you or someone in your family is feeling under the weather, you'll want to determine their symptoms. **If they are flu-like, Gershon says it's best to keep that person isolated in a room: Don't share meals or bedding, and avoid their dirty tissues or mucus. "Hard common surfaces in the home — everything from counters to TV remotes — are the target for immediate disinfecting. If you are not sure what to wipe, pay attention to the things you are touching in the household and put a sticky note on it to remind yourself where to clean." If you don't have immediate access to disinfectant wipes or sprays, you can make your own by mixing 1/4 of a cup of bleach with 2 and 1/4 cups of water,** Gershon says.

Gershon also stresses that those who may be sick shouldn't handle family pets, which are also at risk here. "I have read that people who are potentially infected with COVID-19 shouldn't handle family pets," she explains. "There is concern it might spread to them and thereby spread to others in the household that way." Go to the hospital if your symptoms get worse.

Nearly every expert we consulted agreed: **Don't immediately panic if you've fallen ill**, as March is still considered a prime part of respiratory virus season, and many people could simply be mistaking symptoms of the common cold for early signs of coronavirus. That being said, the CDC lists the following symptoms as reasons that you should **contact your primary doctor**:

**Fever**

**Cough**

**Shortness of breath**

More often than not, healthcare providers will tell you if you should seek official in-person treatment (they may even ask you to consider tele-health options first), says Lednický.

"If you have someone at home who has these symptoms and has been told to stay at home for now, the CDC recommends that you **call the nearest emergency room if they are suddenly having difficulty breathing, as this may be a sign that the illness is worsening,**" says Gershon. For more information on when you should seek medical attention due to potential COVID-19 exposure, keep an eye on the CDC's official coronavirus status page, which can answer common questions and help you understand which symptoms may need immediate attention.

The bottom line: The coronavirus is something that should be taken seriously, but don't panic just yet. Follow the instructions above and seek professional medical attention if necessary.