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Patient education: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) overview (The Basics)

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Patient education: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) overview (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 stands for "coronavirus disease 2019." It is caused by a virus called SARS-CoV-2. The virus first appeared in late 2019 and quickly spread around the world.

People with COVID-19 can have fever, cough, trouble breathing, and other symptoms. Problems with breathing happen when the infection affects the lungs and causes pneumonia (figure 1).

Most people who get COVID-19 will not get severely ill. But some do. In many areas, people have been told to stay home and away from other people. This is to try to slow the spread of the virus.

How is COVID-19 spread?

The virus that causes COVID-19 mainly spreads from person to person. This usually happens when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks near other people. Doctors also think it is possible to get sick if you touch a surface that has the virus on it and then touch your mouth, nose, or eyes. This is similar to how the flu spreads, but the virus that causes COVID-19 spreads more easily.

A person can be infected, and spread the virus to others, even without having any symptoms. This is why keeping people apart is one of the best ways to slow the spread.

It is also possible for the virus to spread from an infected person to an animal, like a pet. But this seems to be uncommon. There is no evidence that a person could get the virus from a pet.

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

Symptoms usually start 4 or 5 days after a person is infected with the virus. But in some people, it can take up to 2 weeks for symptoms to appear. Some people never show symptoms at all.

When symptoms do happen, they can include:

- Fever
Cough
Trouble breathing
Feeling tired
Shaking chills
Muscle aches
Headache
Sore throat
Problems with sense of smell or taste

Some people have digestive problems like nausea or diarrhea.

For most people, symptoms will get better within a few weeks. But in others, COVID-19 can lead to serious problems like pneumonia, not getting enough oxygen, heart problems, or even death. This is more common in people who are 65 years or older or have other health problems like heart disease, diabetes, lung disease, cancer, or obesity.

While children can get COVID-19, they are less likely to have severe symptoms. More information about COVID-19 and children is available separately. (See "Patient education: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and children (The Basics)".)

What should I do if I have symptoms?

If you have a fever, cough, trouble breathing, or a combination of other COVID-19 symptoms, call your doctor or nurse. They will ask about your symptoms. They might also ask about any recent travel and whether you have been around anyone who might be sick.

If your symptoms are not severe, it is best to call before you go in. The staff can tell you what to do and whether you need to be seen in person. Many people with only mild symptoms should stay home and avoid other people until they get better. If you do need to go to the clinic or hospital, cover your nose and mouth with cloth. This helps protect other people. The staff might also have you wait someplace away from other people.

If you are severely ill and need to go to the clinic or hospital right away, you should still call ahead. This way the staff can care for you while taking steps to protect others.

Is there a test for the virus that causes COVID-19?

Yes. If your doctor or nurse suspects you have COVID-19, they might take a swab from inside your nose and send it to a lab for testing. If you are coughing up mucus, they might also test a sample of the mucus. These tests can help your doctor figure out if you have COVID-19 or another illness.

In some areas, it might not be possible to test everyone who might have been exposed to the virus. If your doctor cannot test you, they might tell you to stay home, avoid other people, and call if your symptoms get worse.

There is also a blood test that can show if a person has had COVID-19 in the past. Over time, this could help experts understand how many people were infected without knowing it. This test is not yet available everywhere. Experts are also using blood tests to study whether a person who has had COVID-19 could get it again.

How is COVID-19 treated?

There is no known specific treatment for COVID-19. Many people will be able to stay home while they get better. But people with serious symptoms or other health problems might need to go to the hospital.

- Mild illness - Mild illness means you might have symptoms like fever and cough, but you do not have trouble breathing. Most people with COVID-19 have mild illness and can rest at home until they get better. This usually takes about 2 weeks, but it's not the same for everyone.

If you are recovering from COVID-19, it's important to stay home and "self-isolate" until your doctor or nurse tells you it's safe to go back to your normal activities. Self-isolation means staying apart from other people, even the people you live with. When you can stop self-isolation will depend on how long it has been since you had symptoms, and in some cases, whether you have had a negative test (showing that the virus is no longer in your body).

- Severe illness - If you have more severe illness with trouble breathing, you might need to stay in the hospital, possibly in the intensive care unit (also called the "ICU"). While you are there, you will most likely be in a special isolation room. Only medical staff will be allowed in the room, and they will have to wear special gowns, gloves, masks, and eye protection.

The doctors and nurses can monitor and support your breathing and other body functions and make you as comfortable as possible. You might need extra oxygen to help you breathe easily. If you are having a very hard time breathing, you might need to be put on a ventilator. This is a machine to help you breathe.

Doctors are studying several different treatments to learn whether they might work to treat COVID-19. In certain cases, doctors might recommend these treatments or being part of a clinical trial. A clinical trial is a scientific study that tests new medicines to see how well they work. Do not try any new medicines or treatments without talking to a doctor.

Can COVID-19 be prevented?

There is not yet a vaccine to prevent COVID-19. But there are things you can do to reduce your chances of getting it. These steps are a good idea for everyone, especially if you are in an area where the infection is spreading very quickly. But they are extra important for people age 65 years or older or who have other health problems.

To help protect yourself and others:

- Practice "social distancing." It's most important to avoid contact with people who are sick. But social distancing also means staying away from all people who do not live in your household. It is also called "physical distancing."

Avoiding crowds is an important part of social distancing. But even small gatherings can be risky, so it's best to stay home as much as you can. When you do need to go out, such as for food or medicine, try your best to stay at least 6 feet (about 2 meters) away from other people. Some expert groups also recommend covering your face when you need to go out. (See "What about face masks?" below.)

- Wash your hands with soap and water often. This is especially important after being out in public. Make sure to rub your hands with soap for at least 20 seconds, cleaning your wrists, fingernails, and in between your fingers. Then rinse your hands and dry them with a paper towel you can throw away.

If you are not near a sink, you can use a hand sanitizing gel to clean your hands. The gels with at least 60 percent alcohol work the best. But it is better to wash with soap and water if you can.

- Avoid touching your face, especially your mouth, nose, or eyes.

- Avoid traveling if you can. Some experts recommend not traveling to or from certain areas where COVID-19 is spreading quickly. But any form of travel, especially if you spend time in crowded places like airports, increases your risk. If lots of people travel, it also makes it more likely that the virus will spread to more parts of the world.

Why is social distancing so important?

Keeping people away from each other is one of the best ways to control the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19. That's because the virus can spread easily through close contact, and it's not always possible to know who is infected.

In many places, schools and businesses have closed, and events have been canceled. But social distancing is not just about avoiding big crowds. It's also important to avoid any gatherings with people from outside your household, even in small groups. Many people find it helpful to stay in touch with friends and relatives in other ways, like over the phone or online. If you have outdoor space, or can take a short walk without getting near other people, it can also help to get fresh air when you are able.

When experts recommend staying home, it's important to take this seriously and follow instructions as best you can. It's hard having to change your life and habits, and it's normal to want things to get back to the way they used to be. But remember, even if you do not get very sick from COVID-19, you could still spread it to others who could get very sick. If people stop social distancing too soon, more people will get sick, and it will take longer for many places like schools and businesses to reopen.

What about face masks?

When COVID-19 started to spread throughout the world, expert groups in the United States did not recommend that most people wear a face mask for protection. That's because if healthy people buy a lot of medical masks, there won't be enough for the doctors and nurses who need them.

Washing your hands often and practicing social distancing are still the best ways to protect yourself and others. And experts still do not recommend that people who are not health workers wear a medical mask. But the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) does now recommend covering your face when you need to leave your house. This is mostly so that if you are sick, even if you don't have any symptoms, you are less likely to spread the infection to other people. You can use cloth or a bandana to cover your mouth and nose. There are instructions online about how to make your own mask using fabric and rubber bands.

Even if you cover your face, it's still important to stay home except when you need to make necessary trips out, like for food or medicine. And be sure to stay at least 6 feet (2 meters) away from other people when you do leave your home.

When you take your face cover off, make sure you do not touch your eyes, nose, or mouth. And wash your hands after you touch the face cover. You can wash the face cover with the rest of your laundry.

What things are NOT recommended to prevent COVID-19?

There are a lot of opinions about COVID-19, including rumors about how to avoid it. But not all of this information is accurate. For example, you might have heard that you can lower your risk by using a hand dryer, rinsing out your nose with salt water, or taking antibiotics. These things do not work. There is also no evidence that taking vitamins helps.

What should I do if someone in my home has COVID-19?

If someone in your home has COVID-19, there are additional things you can do to protect yourself and others:

- Keep the sick person away from others - The sick person should stay in a separate room, and use a different bathroom if possible. They should also eat in their own room.

Experts also recommend that the person stay away from pets in the house until they are better.

- Have them cover their face - The sick person should cover their nose and mouth with a cloth mask by covering their eyes in the same room as other people. If they can't use a face cover, you can help protect yourself when they cover your face when you are in the room with them.

- Wash hands - Wash your hands with soap and water often (see above).

- Clean often - Here are some specific things that can help:

- Wear disposable gloves when you clean. It's also a good idea to wear gloves when you have to touch the sick person's laundry, dishes, utensils, or trash.

- When you do the sick person's laundry, avoid letting dirty clothes or bedding touch your body. Wash your hands and clean the outside of the washer after putting in the laundry.

- Regularly clean things that are touched a lot. This includes counters, bedside tables, doorknobs, computers, phones, and bathroom surfaces.

- Clean things in your home with soap and water, but also use disinfectants on appropriate surfaces. Some cleaning products work well to kill bacteria, but not viruses, so it's important to check labels. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has a list of products here: www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2.

What if I feel fine but think I was exposed?

If you think you were in close contact with someone with COVID-19, but you don't have any symptoms, you should "self-quarantine" at home for at least 14 days. This means staying home as much as possible, and staying at least 6 feet (2 meters) away from other people in your home. Self-quarantine is slightly different from self-isolation, which is when a person who is sick stays in a completely separate room from others.

You should also monitor yourself for any symptoms. If you do start to have symptoms, call your doctor or nurse right away.

What if I am pregnant?

More information about COVID-19 and pregnancy is available separately. (See "Patient education: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and pregnancy (The Basics)".)

If you are pregnant and you have questions about COVID-19, talk to your doctor, nurse, or midwife.

What can I do to cope with stress and anxiety?

It's normal to feel anxious or worried about COVID-19. You can take care of yourself, and your family, by trying to:

- Take breaks from the news
Get regular exercise and eat healthy foods
Try to find activities that you enjoy and can do at home
Stay in touch with your friends and family members

Keep in mind that most people do not get severely ill from COVID-19. It helps to be prepared, and it's important to do what you can to lower your risk and help slow the spread of the virus. But try not to panic.

Where can I go to learn more?

As we learn more about this virus, expert recommendations will continue to change. Check with your doctor or public health official to get the most updated information about how to protect yourself.

For information about COVID-19 in your area, you can call your local public health office. In the United States, this usually means your city or town's Board of Health. Many states also have a "hotline" phone number you can call.

You can find more information about COVID-19 at the following websites:

- United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): www.cdc.gov/COVID19
World Health Organization (WHO): www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

A list of other resources from expert groups around the world is also available. (See "Society guideline links: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) - Resources for patients".)

More on this topic

- Patient education: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and children (The Basics)
Patient education: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and pregnancy (The Basics)
Patient education: Acute respiratory distress syndrome (The Basics)
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