

How to Prepare for Coronavirus in the U.S.

Americans are advised to brace for the likely spread of COVID-19. Here's how you can protect yourself and your family.

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After spreading rapidly in other parts of the world, U.S. health officials believe COVID-19 is going to hit closer to home. It's time to brace for the spread of the new coronavirus in communities across the country, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"It's not so much a question of if this will happen anymore, but rather more a question of exactly when this will happen and how many people in this country will have severe illness," said Dr. Nancy Messonnier, head of the CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases in a media briefing on February 25.

The following day, the tally of Americans diagnosed with COVID-19 reached 57. Of these, 42 were linked to the Diamond Princess cruise ship that was quarantined off the coast of Japan. Although the coronavirus may not be currently spreading among U.S. communities, the CDC cautions that this is likely to change, and more cases are likely to be confirmed in the days and weeks ahead.

What could happen during a U.S. outbreak?

Many vaccines are currently in development but there isn't currently a way to immunize people against COVID-19. There are also no specific medications to treat the coronavirus, which typically causes a range of respiratory symptoms, including fever, coughing, muscle pain, sore throat and shortness of breath. More rarely, severe cases can lead to more serious complications, such as pneumonia and respiratory failure. If person-to-person spread occurs in the U.S., many people would likely need simultaneous medical care, which could burden hospital and urgent care centers.

It's important to note, however, the U.S. response to a COVID-19 outbreak would differ from the response in countries with weaker healthcare systems and more limited access to adequate medical care.

Employees and students who are affected may miss school and work. Under a more severe scenario, public transportation, law enforcement and other community resources may also be affected, the CDC explains.

Another important fact to remember: Most cases are not severe. The majority of patients are able to recover on their own with supportive care to ease respiratory symptoms. In fact, the World Health Organization estimates that more than 80 percent of those with COVID-19 will develop only a mild infection and recover. It's widely believed that many more mild cases haven't been detected and aren't included in official counts.

Only about 16 percent of cases result in severe illness and complications, including pneumonia and trouble breathing. Fewer still, about 5 percent, will develop very serious issues, including respiratory failure, septic shock and organ failure. The WHO also estimates that just 2 percent of reported COVID-19 cases are fatal. To put this into perspective, tens of thousands of people around the world have already recovered from the infection—far surpassing the number of confirmed deaths.

Anyone can become infected with COVID-19 but older people seem to be among those at highest risk. People with pre-existing medical conditions, such as asthma, diabetes and heart disease, are also at greater risk of developing a severe infection.

How to get ready for COVID-19 in the U.S.

The global spread of a novel virus is worrisome. But like the flu and other respiratory infections, there is a lot you can do to avoid exposure and reduce your risk of infection.

Researchers believe COVID-19 spreads by droplet transmission and possibly by contact transmission. Contact transmission includes direct exposure to someone who is sick, including shaking hands, hugging or kissing. It can also occur when people touch a contaminated surface and then touch their mouth, nose or eyes.

Contaminated droplets can also escape the body of a sick person when they cough or sneeze, then land in a nearby person's mouth or nose. They can travel about six feet before settling on a nearby surface.

It is not yet clear how long COVID-19 survives on surfaces, but the WHO notes that early evidence suggests it may persist for up to several days, depending on the type of surface and other variables, like temperature and humidity.

That means many of the common-sense steps you already take to avoid the flu and other common germs may help in protecting against COVID-19.

Keep your hands clean

Washing your hands often and thoroughly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds is one of the most effective ways to protect yourself against respiratory illnesses, including COVID-19.

If you don't have access to soap and water, using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer is a good alternative—if you pick the right one and use it frequently and properly.

Choose a hand sanitizer than contains at least 60 percent alcohol, the CDC recommends. Before applying the liquid or gel, remove as much dirt or debris from your hands as possible. Read the product label for instructions and apply as much as directed to ensure its effectiveness. Then, rub the sanitizer over all surfaces of your hands until they are dry.

Be sure that your hands are clean before eating or touching your eyes, mouth or nose, after using the bathroom and while working in the kitchen.

Other precautions to avoid infection

There are some other general precautionary steps you can take to avoid germs, including COVID-19 and the flu:

- Avoid contact and keep some distance between you and anyone who is or appears to be sick.
- Stay home if you develop symptoms or suspect that you are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with an unused tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash. If you don't have a tissue, use your upper sleeve or elbow—not your hands.
- Clean and disinfect commonly used objects and surfaces you come into contact with throughout your day, such as computer keyboards, cell phones, doorknobs, faucets and bathroom fixtures with household cleaning sprays or wipes. At work, keep tissues, soap, alcohol-based hand sanitizer and antiseptic wipes on hand.
- Avoid sharing personal items, such as pens, dishes, utensils, water bottles and drinking glasses. Even at home, it's important to avoid using someone else's fork, spoon or glass. Avoid sharing bedding with other people or pets as well. Used sheets should be washed well with soap and water.

It's also important to do what you can to stay healthy and keep your immune system strong, such as getting quality sleep, following a healthy diet and exercising regularly.

Getting a flu shot is also wise. The CDC points out that the symptoms of COVID-19 are similar to those of the flu, and the current coronavirus outbreak is occurring when flu activity across the U.S. is high. In order to protect against the flu and avoid unnecessary evaluation for COVID-19, everyone age 6 months and older should receive a seasonal flu shot.

What about wearing a facemask?

The use of surgical or other facemasks is not recommended for otherwise healthy people trying to protect themselves against COVID-19, according to the CDC. Masks can be costly, and they are not a foolproof way to prevent infection—especially if they are used incorrectly. Hoarding them or using them unnecessarily could not only give people a false sense of security but also lead to shortages among medical personnel.

To prevent the spread of COVID-19 to others in the community, health officials emphasize that face masks should only be worn by those who develop coronavirus symptoms or have a confirmed diagnosis. Face masks should also be worn by medical personnel or anyone caring for someone who is infected.

If you think you might be sick

Anyone who believes they may be infected with COVID-19 or might have been exposed to the coronavirus should take immediate steps to isolate themselves and avoid spreading their illness to others.

If you develop any warning signs of infection you should call your health care provider (HCP) for instructions. Before going to a doctor's office or emergency room, be sure to call ahead and inform the medical staff that you may have been exposed to COVID-19. Your HCP will work with your local public health department and the CDC to determine if you need to be tested for the coronavirus.

Medically reviewed in February 2020.

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