Patient Education

COVID-19 Overview

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The Basics

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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.

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. There have also been some reports of rashes or other skin symptoms. For example, some people with COVID-19 get reddish-purple spots on their fingers or toes. But it's not clear why or how often this happens.

For most people, symptoms will get better within a few weeks. But a small number of people get very sick and stop being able to breathe on their own. In severe cases, their organs stop working, which can lead to death.

Some people with COVID-19 continue to have some symptoms for weeks or months. This seems to be more likely in people who are sick enough to need to stay in the hospital. But this can also happen in people who did not get very sick. Doctors are still learning about the long-term effects of COVID-19.

While children can get COVID-19, they are less likely than adults to have severe symptoms. More information about COVID-19 and children is available separately. (See "COVID-19 and children".)

Am I at risk for getting seriously ill? — It depends on your age and health. In some people, COVID-19 leads to serious problems like pneumonia, not getting enough oxygen, heart problems, or even death. This risk gets higher as people get older. It is also higher in people who have other health problems like serious heart disease, chronic kidney disease, type 2 diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), sickle cell disease, or obesity. People who have a weak immune system for other reasons (for example, HIV infection or certain medicines), asthma, cystic fibrosis, type 1 diabetes, or high blood pressure might also be at higher risk for serious problems.

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. The virus is passed through tiny particles from the infected person's lungs and airway. These particles can easily travel through the air to other people who are nearby. In some cases, like in indoor spaces where the same air keeps being blown around, virus in the particles might be able to spread to other people who are farther away.

The virus can be passed easily between people who live together. But it can also spread at gatherings where people are talking close together, shaking hands, hugging, sharing food, or even singing together. Eating at restaurants raises the risk of infection, since people tend to be close to each other and not covering their faces. Doctors also think it is possible to get infected if you touch a surface that has the virus on it and then touch your mouth, nose, or eyes. However, this is probably not very common.

A person can be infected, and spread the virus to others, even without having any symptoms.

Are there different variants of the virus that causes COVID-19? — Yes. Viruses constantly change or "mutate." When this happens, a new strain or "variant" can form. Most of the time, new variants do not change the way a virus works. But when a variant has changes in important parts of the virus, it can act differently.

Experts have discovered several new variants of the virus that causes COVID-19. Certain variants seem to spread more easily than the original virus. They might also make people sicker.

Experts are studying the different variants. This will help them better understand how far they have spread, whether they affect people differently, and how well different vaccines protect against them.

The more people who get vaccinated against COVID-19, the harder it will be for the virus to form new variants.

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 or mouth for testing. In some cases, they might take a sample of your saliva. These tests can help your doctor figure out if you have COVID-19 or another illness.

In some places, you need to see a doctor or nurse to get tested. In other places, there are organizations that make testing available for anyone. Depending on the lab, it can take up to several days to get test results back.

The tests used to diagnose COVID-19 are either "nucleic acid tests" or "antigen tests." Nucleic acid tests, also called "molecular" tests, look for the genetic material from the virus. Antigen tests look for proteins from the virus. Antigen tests can give results faster than most nucleic acid tests. But they are not as accurate as nucleic acid tests. They are more likely to give "false negative" results. This is when the test comes back negative even though the person actually is infected.

There is also a blood test that can show if a person has had COVID-19 **in the past**. This is called an "antibody" test. Antibody tests are generally not used on their own to diagnose COVID-19 or make decisions about care. But experts can use them to learn how many people in a certain area were infected without knowing it.

Can COVID-19 be prevented? — The best way to prevent COVID-19 is to **get vaccinated**. In the United States, the first vaccines became available in late 2020. People age 12 and older can get a vaccine.

If enough people get the vaccine, the virus will stop spreading so quickly. More information about COVID-19 vaccines, including what you can do after being vaccinated, is available separately. (See "COVID-19 vaccines".)

Experts believe that vaccines will be one of the most important ways to control the COVID-19 pandemic. People who are fully vaccinated are at much lower risk of getting the virus.

If you are **not** yet vaccinated, there are other ways 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 at least 6 feet (about 2 meters) from anyone outside your household. That's because the virus can spread easily through close contact, and it's not always possible to know who is infected.

●**Wear a face mask** when you need to go be in public around other people. This is mostly so that if you are infected, even if you don't have any symptoms, you are less likely to spread the infection to other people. It might also help protect you from others who could be infected. Make sure your mask covers your mouth **and** nose.

You can buy cloth masks and disposable (non-medical) masks in stores or online. Cloth masks work best if they have several layers of fabric. Your mask should fit snugly over your face with no gaps. You can improve the fit by using a mask with an adjustable nose wire, adjusting or knotting the ear loops to make it tighter, or wearing a cloth mask on top of a disposable mask.

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

When you are outdoors and not around other people, you might not need to wear a mask. But it's important to know what the rules are in your area. The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has more information about how to wear a face mask: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/about-face-coverings.html.

●**Wash your hands** with soap and water often. This is especially important after being out in public or touching surfaces that many other people also touch, like door handles or railings. The risk of getting infected by touching items like this is probably not very high. Still, it's a good idea to wash your hands often. This also helps protect you from other illnesses, like the flu or the common cold.

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, and eyes.

●**Avoid or limit traveling** if you can. Any form of travel, especially if you spend time in crowded places like airports, increases your risk of getting and spreading infection.

If you do need to travel, be sure to check whether there are any rules about COVID-19 in the area you are visiting. In the United States, some places require people to "self-quarantine" for some length of time if they are visiting (or returning) from another state. This means not going out in public or being around other people. The United States also requires a negative COVID-19 test for anyone who enters, or returns to, the country. Many other countries have testing requirements for visiting, too. All of these rules are meant to help slow the spread of COVID-19.

Once you are fully vaccinated, you are much less likely to get the virus. "Fully vaccinated" means you have had all doses of the vaccine **and** it has been at least 2 weeks since the last dose. (If you had a single-dose vaccine, you are fully vaccinated 2 weeks after you get the shot.)

What should I do if I have symptoms? — If you have a fever, cough, trouble breathing, or other symptoms of COVID-19, **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 have been infected. Then they can tell you if you should come in or go somewhere else to be tested.

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, be sure to wear a mask. 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 if possible. This way the staff can care for you while taking steps to protect others. If you think you are having a medical emergency, **call for an ambulance** (in the US and Canada, dial 9-1-1).

What if I feel fine but think I was exposed? — If you think you were in close contact with someone with COVID-19, what to do next depends on whether you have already had COVID-19 or gotten the vaccine:

●If you **have not** had COVID-19 or gotten the vaccine – You should get tested after a possible exposure, even if you don't have any symptoms. Call your doctor or nurse if you aren't sure where to get a test. Then self-quarantine at home and monitor yourself for symptoms. This means staying home as much as possible, and staying at least 6 feet (2 meters) away from other people in your home.

The safest thing to do after a possible exposure is to self-quarantine for 14 days. This can be challenging with work, school, or other responsibilities. Because of this, some public health departments might allow people to stop quarantining sooner, especially if they get a negative test. If you're not sure how long to quarantine for, contact your local public health office or ask your doctor or nurse.

●If you **have** had COVID-19 or gotten the vaccine – If you had COVID-19 within the last 3 months, you do not need to self-quarantine. If you had COVID-19 but it was more than 3 months ago, follow the steps above.

If you are fully vaccinated, you do **not** need to self-quarantine. But you should still get tested 3 to 5 days after you were in contact with the person who had COVID-19. Even though you are much less likely to get the infection after being vaccinated, it is still possible.

If you self-quarantine for less than 14 days, or if you do not need to self-quarantine, you should still monitor yourself for symptoms for the full 14 days. If you start to have any symptoms, call your doctor or nurse right away. You should also be extra careful about wearing a mask and social distancing during this time.

How is COVID-19 treated? — 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 stop. 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 a breathing tube. The tube goes down your throat and into your lungs. It is connected to a machine to help you breathe, called a "ventilator."

Doctors are studying several possible treatments for COVID-19. In certain cases, doctors might recommend medicines that seem to help some people who are severely ill or at risk of getting severely ill. They also might recommend 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.

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 wear a mask – The sick person should wear a mask when they are in the same room as other people. If they can't wear a mask, you can help protect yourself by covering your face when you are in the room with them.

●Wash hands – Wash your hands with soap and water often.

●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. Wash your hands after removing your gloves.

•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 am pregnant? — More information about COVID-19 and pregnancy is available separately. (See "COVID-19 and pregnancy".)

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

What can I do to cope with stress and anxiety? — It's normal to feel anxious or worried about COVID-19. It's also normal to feel stressed, lonely, or tired of not being able to do your usual activities. You can take care of yourself by trying to:

●Take breaks from the news

●Get regular exercise and eat healthy foods

●Find activities that you enjoy and can do at home

●Stay in touch with your friends and family members

It might help to remember that by doing things like getting vaccinated and following local guidelines, you are helping to protect other people in your community.

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 and others.

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

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