

KEY CORONAVIRUS FACTS TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND YOUR COMMUNITY

What you can do to support everyone and help save lives

by Ashita S. Batavia, MD, MSc, infectious disease expert, with Barbara Brody, freelance health reporter

The novel coronavirus, also referred to as COVID-19 in this article, is incredibly contagious: It spreads through respiratory droplets that are released when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or even breathes. **If you're standing less than 6 feet away from an infected person you can be infected, and this can happen before the infected person shows symptoms.**

The most common COVID-19 symptoms are fever, dry cough, and shortness of breath. Some patients also develop a runny nose or digestive issues, such as diarrhea.

If you think you have COVID-19 do NOT go to a doctor's office, urgent care, or a testing facility unless a healthcare professional has told you to do so. Instead, call your doctor or an urgent care center and ask for guidance (in New York, you can also call the State hotline at 888-364-3065). **Testing capacity is very limited**, and you risk contracting the virus if you don't already have it while waiting to be tested.

If you develop severe symptoms—such as difficulty breathing, high fevers or significant dizziness with standing or walking—call 911 or go to the ER.

TOP 5 FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT SOCIAL DISTANCING

1. Can I still take walks outside?

It depends where you live in the country. Unless the government has said otherwise, at minimum you should practice social distancing: This means you can take walks outdoors, sit on your porch, or kick a ball around, as long as you are 6-10 feet away from people who do not live in your home. **Avoid touching playground equipment or other shared surfaces.** Please wash your hands or use hand sanitizer as soon as you return home.

Exception: If you believe you have contracted COVID-19, whether your diagnosis has been confirmed with a test or not, **you must to isolate yourself at home for at least 14 days from symptom onset.**

2. Can my kids have playdates? What if it's with neighbors they play with all the time?

Unfortunately, no. Children can be infected and can spread COVID-19 to others, including adults, before they show symptoms. At this time it is critical that everyone does their part to prevent the spread of this infection.

3. Can our nanny/babysitter/piano teacher/house cleaner still come to help out?

Unfortunately, no. Only people living with you should be entering your home at this time. People can spread COVID-19 to others before they show symptoms.

4. Is it safe to go to the grocery store or pharmacy?

If you are healthy and haven't been exposed to anyone with COVID-19, then it is OK to shop for essential items like groceries and medication. Try to visit stores at off-peak times, wipe down cart handles with sanitizing wipes, and shop as quickly as possible. Please wash your hands thoroughly afterward.

5. Can we still order takeout?

The risk is minimal, but not zero. COVID-19 may live on certain surfaces for many hours or days, so it's theoretically possible to get it by touching something an infected person has touched and then touching your mouth or nose. Please wash your hands before and after handling takeout containers.

COMMON MYTHS ABOUT COVID-19

Myth: Only seniors and immune-compromised people are at risk.

Reality: Although the above-mentioned groups are at highest risk—as are those with chronic conditions (like diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma, etc.)—**younger people with no pre-existing conditions have become critically ill** and some have died. Everyone should be taking this threat seriously.

Myth: It's not that big a deal; it's similar to the flu.

Reality: COVID-19 spreads more easily and **the mortality rate is 10 times higher than the flu**. About 0.01% of people who contract the flu will die from it. On average, 3.5% of those who get COVID-19 will die, but the rate is substantially higher for seniors and people with pre-existing conditions.

Myth: You should wear a mask to protect yourself.

Reality: Unless you are a healthcare professional working with patients or you have COVID-19 yourself and are trying to avoid infecting others in your household, you should not be wearing a mask.

Myth: You can prevent COVID-19 by taking specific supplements, using essential oils, gargling with salt water, etc.

Reality: There is no scientific evidence that any of these measures are helpful. The best way to protect yourself is to wash your hands regularly, practice social distancing, and avoid people who are sick.

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