Coronavirus COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Facts are rapidly changing. Check current CDC and other status reports.

What is a coronavirus?

This new virus belongs to a family of viruses known as coronaviruses. Named for the crown-like spikes on their surfaces, they infect mostly bats, pigs and small mammals. But they mutate easily and can jump from animals to humans, and from one human to another. Seven strains are known to infect humans, including this new virus, causing illnesses in the respiratory tract. Four of those strains cause common colds. Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)and Middle East respiratory syndrome, (MERS) are highly dangerous. The virus causing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), is not the same as the coronaviruses that commonly circulate among humans and cause mild illness, like the common cold. CDC Coronavirus page.

What are the symptoms of the illness and how do you know if you have it?

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, tiredness, and dry cough. Some patients may have aches and pains, nasal congestion, runny nose, sore throat or diarrhea. These symptoms are usually mild and begin gradually.

Some people become infected but don't develop any symptoms and don't feel unwell. Most people (about 80%) recover from the disease without needing special treatment. Around 1 out of every 6 people who gets COVID-19 becomes seriously ill and develops difficulty breathing. COVID-19 Symptoms.

Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like high blood pressure, heart problems or diabetes, are more likely to develop serious illness. About 2% of people with the disease have died. People with fever, cough and difficulty breathing should seek medical attention.

Who is most at risk?

The risk is highest for older people and those with other health conditions such as diabetes. A Chinese study concluded that most of the deaths were patients 60 or older, and/or had other illnesses. Many patients who have died were admitted to hospitals when their illness was advanced and might have lived had they earlier sought care. Few children have been reported with the infection, but that could change.

How at risk is someone in the U.S.?

The CDC and state health departments stated on February 26 that:

The health risk from novel coronavirus to the general public remains low at this time. While COVID-19 has a high transmission rate, it has a low mortality rate. From the international data we have, of those who have tested positive for COVID-19, approximately 80 percent do not exhibit symptoms that would require hospitalization. There have been no confirmed deaths related to COVID-19 in the United States to date.

The World Health Organization (WHO) said:

If you are not in an area where COVID-19 is spreading, or if you have not travelled from one of those areas or have not been in close contact with someone who has and is feeling unwell, your chances of getting it are currently low.

However, it's understandable that you may feel stressed and anxious about the situation. It's a good idea to get the facts to help you accurately determine your risks so that you can take reasonable precautions.

There are currently few cases in the U.S., and the virus is not yet spreading widely. Most confirmed infections are people who had been evacuated, travel-related, or had close contact with someone who traveled, such as traveler's spouse. The CDC does expect the virus to spread more widely and is preparing for that likelihood.

On February 27, the CDC found a Northern California patient believed to be the first U.S. case from an unknown, community-spread meaning the source of infection is unknown.

How is the virus spread among humans?

People can catch COVID-19 from others who have the virus. The disease can spread from person to person through small droplets from the nose or mouth which are spread when a person with COVID-19 coughs or exhales. These droplets land on objects and surfaces around the person. Other people then catch COVID-19 by touching these objects or surfaces, then touching their eyes, nose or mouth.

People can also catch COVID-19 if they breathe in droplets from a person with COVID-19 who coughs out or exhales droplets. Therefore, it is important to stay more than 1 meter (3 feet) away from a person who is sick. The CDC recommends as much as 6 feet.

Can the virus spread from contact with infected surfaces or objects?

It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads.

It is not certain how long the virus that causes COVID-19 survives on surfaces, but it seems to behave like other coronaviruses. Studies suggest that coronaviruses (including preliminary information on the COVID-19 virus) may persist on surfaces for a few hours or up to several days. This may vary under different conditions (e.g. type of surface, temperature or humidity of the environment). The shorter period seems likely.

If you think a surface may be infected, clean it with simple disinfectant to kill the virus and protect yourself and others. Clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water. Avoid touching your eyes, mouth, or nose.

When does spread happen?

People are thought to be most infectious when they are most symptomatic (the sickest). Some spread might be possible before people show symptoms. There have been reports of this with this new coronavirus, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads.

How efficiently does the virus spread?

How easily a virus spreads from person-to-person can vary. Some viruses are highly contagious (like measles), while other viruses are less so. Another factor is whether the spread continues over multiple generations of people (if spread is sustained). The virus that causes COVID-19 seems to be spreading easily and sustainably in Hubei province and other parts of China. In the United States, spread from person-to-person has occurred only among a few close contacts and has not spread any further to date, although a possible case has occurred in California.

What is the incubation period?

So far, public health authorities have consistently determined that People become ill between 2 and 14 days after exposure based largely on experience with MERS-CoV viruses. Chinese researchers recently cited an average incubation period of 5.2 days.

Can you catch the virus from someone even before they have symptoms?

It is possible. But little is known so far. In A 15-year-old resident of Wuhan, the epicenter of the outbreak, tested positive for the coronavirus despite having no fever or cough, according to that special administrative region of China. Scientists reported in the Lancet medical journal that they identified the coronavirus in a 10-year-old boy who developed no symptoms, even though others in the child's family fell ill. Chinese news outlets have reported a handful of other potential asymptomatic cases.

Is there a test?

Public-health officials have developed and are distributing diagnostic tests, which are being used to confirm whether a patient has the new coronavirus or another infection. In Hubei Province, cases are also being diagnosed based on chest X-rays and symptoms. Scientists are working on a blood test to detect antibodies to the virus, to determine how many people in the population have been infected. Some may not have gotten sick.

Can a person test negative and later test positive for COVID-19?

Using the CDC-developed diagnostic test, a negative result means that the virus that causes COVID-19 was not found in the person's sample. In the early stages of infection, it is possible the virus will not be detected.

For COVID-19, a negative test result for a sample collected while a person has symptoms likely means that the COVID-19 virus is not causing their current illness.

How Effective Are Masks?

Authorities say that people with no respiratory symptoms, such as cough, do not need to wear a mask. WHO recommends the use of masks for people who have symptoms of COVID-19 and for those caring for individuals who have symptoms, such as cough and fever.

The mask supply is under strain. The use of masks is crucial for health workers and people who are taking care of someone (at home or in a health care facility).

WHO advises rational use of medical masks to avoid unnecessary wastage of precious resources and misuse of masks (see Advice on the use of masks). Use a mask only if you have respiratory symptoms (coughing or sneezing), have suspected COVID-19 infection with mild symptoms, or are caring for someone with suspected COVID-19 infection.

Surgical masks are mainly effective against large droplets. While N95 masks are more effective against small droplets, effectiveness depends upon fit and the present of a beard, which prevents full seal.

Remember, a N95 is a negative pressure Respirator and is covered by OSHA standards. Even voluntary use of N95s trigger the employer's duty to provide employees with the Instructional Appendix D to 1910.134.

Wearing a mask does prevent direct contact with nose and mouth and could protect a user who may have touched a contaminated area.

What else can I do to protect myself?

The most important thing you can do is wash your hands frequently, for at least 20 seconds each time. Wash them when you come home, before you eat, and other times that you are touching surfaces. Don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth—viruses can enter your body that way. Wipe down objects and surfaces with household cleaner. Maintain a distance from people who are sick.

Can I refuse to work or travel for business or demand to wear a mask at work?

That depends on whether the risk is real as determined by public health guidance. Generally, the test is whether a reasonable person would recognize a risk. Currently, public health authorities are not recommending reductions in domestic travel or most international travel or raising concerns about working with customers. Nor are public health authorities recommending masks in most nonhealthcare settings. If concerned about safety, you have a right to ask questions and the company will respond. Questions are welcome.

How easily does the new virus spread?

Some disease-modeling experts have estimated that on average, each infected person has transmitted the virus to about 2.6 others, though the range is between 1.5 and 3.5. Those rates are higher than for some influenza viruses, some are lower than SARS, and they are far lower than measles, in which one infected person can transmit the virus to 12 to 18 other people.

Public-health experts caution that these estimates are preliminary, change over time and can be lowered by measures to prevent the virus from spreading.

Where did the new coronavirus come from?

The new virus likely came originally from bats, scientists say. It isn't known exactly where or how it jumped to humans, though. Viruses from bats often infect another mammal first and then mutate to become more transmissible to humans. One hypothesis is that the intermediary animal for this new virus may be a pangolin, a small mammal sold in wildlife markets, prized for its meat and scales covering its body.

Health officials believe the outbreak originated in a large animal and seafood market in Wuhan, China. Of the first 41 cases, 27 had some exposure to that market, according to a report in the Lancet. But three of the first four people to become ill, on Dec. 1 and Dec. 10, said they had no contact with the market.

A study in the New England Journal of Medicine found that 55% of patients in Wuhan who became ill before Jan. 1 had a link to the market, compared with 8.6% of those who became ill after that point.

How dangerous is the new coronavirus?

It appears to be less deadly than a related pathogen—SARS, which erupted in China in 2002 and spread globally in 2003. SARS killed about 10% of the people it infected, while about 2.9% of the people confirmed to be infected with this new coronavirus have died, according to World Health Organization data. It's worth remembering that last year about 36,000 Americans died of the seasonal flu in order to evaluate deaths so far.

Is the virus mutating, particularly in a way that would make it more contagious?

No. The virus has remained stable genetically thus far, according to the World Health Organization and the US CDC.

Is it safe to travel to China?

The U.S. State Department has warned Americans not to travel to China. Most commercial airlines have suspended or reduced flights to and from China. Americans who remain in China should stay home as much as possible, limit contact with others and follow guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to prevent infection.

What happens if a person returns from China or another affected area?

Both the CDC and the US State Department maintain different levels of Travel Alerts for countries, and employers look to those Alerts and public health guidance to determine how to respond to employees returning from affected areas. Depending on the level of Travel Alert, the most current local reports, and public health guidance, employers or schools may determine that returning employees or students or members of families with recently returned travelers should stay at home for 14-days after they left the affected country.

In some situations, returning personnel might also be asked to obtain medical evaluations and releases. Currently DHS has also imposed restrictions on US citizens and other nationals who have returned from China and could add more countries as the virus becomes more active in certain countries. Because individuals infected with COVIN-19 may be infectious before they have symptoms, self-quarantine is often the best response.

Is it safe to go on a cruise?

The U.S. State Department has urged Americans to reconsider cruises to or within Asia, given the risk of infection and of being subjected to a lengthy quarantine.

Could goods imported from China carry the virus?

That is unlikely, the CDC says. Coronaviruses generally don't survive long on inanimate surfaces, according to the agency. The CDC says that currently there is no evidence to support transmission of COVID-19 associated with imported goods and there have not been any cases of COVID-19 in the United States associated with imported goods. Information will be provided on the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) website as it becomes available.

Should I be concerned about pets or other animals and COVID-19?

While this virus seems to have emerged from an animal source, it is now spreading from person-to-person in China. There is no reason to think that any animals including pets in the United States might be a source of infection with this new coronavirus. To date, CDC has not received any reports of pets or other animals becoming sick with COVID-19. At this time, there is no evidence that companion animals including pets can be infected with or spread COVID-19. However, since animals can spread other diseases to people, it's always a good idea to wash your hands after being around animals.

For more information on the many benefits of pet ownership, as well as staying safe and healthy around animals including pets, livestock, and wildlife, visit CDC's Healthy Pets, Healthy People website.