

What does a coronavirus do?

Coronaviruses cause respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to diseases such as COVID-19.

The new coronavirus (2019-nCoV) and COVID-19 disease were unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, so much is unknown today about how this coronavirus spreads. Current knowledge is largely based on what is known about other coronaviruses.

What is known about how COVID-19 spreads?

The World Health Organization (WHO) continues to study different ways COVID-19 spreads and provide updates on its findings. The main way the disease has been spread is when a person with COVID-19 coughs or exhales small droplets from the nose or mouth. These 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 at the time this person is coughing out or exhaling droplets. The most common symptoms are cough, fever and shortness of breath.

Can COVID-19 be caught from a person who has no symptoms?

Yes, but the risk is very low, lower than catching COVID-19 from someone who has a mild cough and does not feel ill. Many people with COVID-19 experience only mild symptoms especially at the early stages of the disease. WHO is trying to determine during which stages of the disease an infected person is most likely to transmit it.

Can I catch COVID-19 from the feces of someone with the disease?

The risk appears to be low. It appears the virus may be present in feces in some cases but spreading of COVID-19 through this route is not a main feature of the outbreak. Because this is a risk, however, it is another reason to clean hands regularly, after using the bathroom and before eating.

What can I do to prepare myself and prevent the spread of disease?

Stay aware of the latest information on the COVID-19 outbreak by paying attention to news reports on WHO findings and public health authorities' activities or accessing their websites. Most people who become infected experience mild illness and recover, but it can be more severe for others. Take care of your health and protect others by doing the following:

- Regularly and thoroughly clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer (at least 60 to 95 percent alcohol) or wash them with soap and water for at least 20 seconds; especially after going to the bathroom; before eating; and after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
- Maintain at least 1 metre (3 feet) distance between yourself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing.
- Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth.
- Make sure you, and the people around you, follow good respiratory hygiene. This means covering your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze. Then dispose of the used tissue immediately.
- Stay home if you feel unwell. If you have a fever, cough and difficulty breathing, seek medical attention and call in advance. Follow the directions of your local health authority.
- Routinely clean frequently touched surfaces and objects.

Should I wear a mask to protect myself?

Use a mask only if you have respiratory symptoms (coughing or sneezing) or suspected COVID-19 infection with mild symptoms. Specialized masks are required to care for someone with suspected COVID-19 infection and must be fitted and handled properly or the caregiver risks infection. The most effective ways to protect yourself and others against COVID-19 are:

- Frequently clean your hands
- Cover your cough with the bend of elbow or tissue
- Maintain a distance of at least 1 meter (3 feet) from people who are coughing or sneezing.

How long does the virus survive on surfaces?

It is not certain how long the virus that causes COVID-19 survives on surfaces, but it seems to behave like other coronaviruses, persisting on surfaces for a few hours or up to several days. This may vary by type of surface or temperature or humidity of the environment. If you think a surface may be infected, clean it with a 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.

What should I do if there is an outbreak in my community?

- Keep away from others who are sick
- Limit face-to-face contact with others as much as possible
- Consult with your healthcare provider if you or your household members are at high risk for COVID-19 complications
- Wear a facemask if advised to do so by your healthcare provider or by a public health official
- Stay home when a household member is sick with respiratory disease symptoms, if instructed to do so by public health officials or a health care provider (Voluntary Home Quarantine)

Q&A on coronaviruses (COVID-19), 23 February 2020, World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>, accessed February 27, 2020

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Community Mitigation Guidance for COVID-19 Response in the United States: Nonpharmaceutical Interventions for Community Preparedness and Outbreak Response, Centers for Disease Control, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/preparing-individuals-communities.html>, accessed February 28, 2020