About coronavirus (COVID-19)

FAST FACTS:

- COVID-19 is caused by a new coronavirus strain called SARS-CoV-2.
- The virus causes mild symptoms in the majority of people, including a new dry cough, temperature or loss or change to sense of smell or taste, which can be managed at home without special treatment.
- Some people develop severe COVID-19 and need to be hospitalised. Older people and those with underlying health conditions are most at-risk.
- Frequent hand washing with soap and water, use of an alcohol-based hand sanitiser and avoiding people who are unwell, are the best ways to prevent COVID-19.
- If you feel unwell, stay at home and call your local health authority. They will tell you what to do next.

This page is updated regularly, make sure you come back for the latest information.

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19, otherwise known as coronavirus disease 2019, is a new illness caused by a previously unknown virus called SARS-CoV-2. The virus is part of a family of coronaviruses which are responsible for lots of different illness from the common cold to the flu. But this new strain can be more severe in some populations.

Discovered in December 2019, the virus has since spread around the world and on 11 March, the
World Health Organization (WHO) declared it pandemic.

How is COVID-19 spread?

COVID-19 is spread through contact with respiratory droplets of a person currently infected with the virus. These droplets come from the nose or mouth of an infected person and may land on surfaces and objects around them. The virus is then spread when another person comes into contact with these droplets and touches their own face, nose or mouth.

The virus may also be spread when an infected person sneezes, coughs or exhales, and people around them breathe in these micro-droplets. For this reason, it’s important to stay around one meter (3 feet) away from someone you know to have the virus.

What is COVID-19 and how is it passed on?

**COVID-19** is a new illness that affects your lungs and airways.

It’s caused by a virus that’s spread in droplets from the mouth and nose when you cough or breathe out.

You can get the virus by:

1. Touching contaminated surfaces and then touching your face.
2. Having close contact with someone with COVID-19 and breathing in droplets exhaled by them.

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

The most common symptoms are a dry cough, tiredness and a high temperature. Other flu-like symptoms such as aches and pains, nasal congestion, runny nose, sore throat or diarrhoea are also common.

Around 80% of people with COVID-19 recover from the virus without the need for special treatment, usually in around seven days. Many may not even know that they have the virus, while others may feel like they have the common cold and treat it as they normally would at home. Around one in six people will get seriously ill from the virus and may have trouble breathing. These people will need hospitalisation.
What do do if you have symptoms:

If you have a fever, new cough, loss or change to sense of smell or taste, or difficulty breathing, stay at home and call your local health authority. They will give you advice and tell you what to do and where to go.

Coronavirus is very infectious, so it’s important to follow guidance to protect your own health, the health of medical staff and your wider community.

Remember to listen to announcements from your government and public health department if they need to contain the virus where you live.

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What are the common symptoms of COVID-19?

- A dry and continuous cough.
- Fever, where your chest or back feels hot.
- Tiredness.
- Other flu-like symptoms (sore throat, aches, runny nose).

If you have difficulty breathing or chest pain call for urgent medical care.

Remember, not everyone who has coronavirus gets symptoms. Follow your government’s advice to stop the spread of the virus.

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Which populations are at-risk for severe COVID-19?

The likelihood of serious illness increases in older populations and people with underlying health problems including high blood pressure, heart problems, lung disease or diabetes. There is currently no evidence to suggest that people living with HIV and on effective antiretroviral treatment are at an increased risk for acquiring COVID-19 or developing severe symptoms. See our page on COVID-19 and living with HIV.
How can I prevent COVID-19?

The best way to stop coronavirus infection is through frequent washing of your hands and not touching your face. Use soap and water and wash for around 40 seconds, you can also use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser if you do not have access to water or soap. If you sneeze or cough, use a clean tissue to cover your mouth and nose, then make sure you throw it away after and wash your hands. If you don’t have a tissue, use the inside of your elbow to cover your mouth and nose.

Be sure to avoid close contact with anyone who has a fever or cough. Similarly, if you are feeling unwell, make sure you keep away from others.

Should I wear a facemask?

Depending on where you live in the world, there may be laws requiring you to wear face masks in certain settings. It’s important to know and follow the local guidance.

There are two types of face masks, fabric masks (which you can make yourself) and medical masks (which are in short supply and needed by healthcare workers). The advice on which type of mask you should wear depends on:

- if you’re a health worker or are caring for someone with COVID-19 symptoms,
- where you are going and whether you will be able to keep a one meter physical distance,
- the overall risk of getting COVID-19 in your community.
Non-medical fabric face masks

- prevent the wearer from passing COVID-19 on to others.
- should be worn in situations where it’s hard to maintain physical distancing of one meter or more - such as on public transport, in shops or in other confined or crowded environments. This advice applies primarily to places where COVID-19 is still being actively passed on in the community.
- are for healthy people to wear, because there is evidence that some people infected with COVID-19 have no symptoms but may still be able to transmit the virus.
- do not protect you from getting COVID-19, so it’s important that you maintain social distancing and don’t rely on only a fabric mask for protection.

Medical masks

- prevent the wearer from getting infected and from passing COVID-19 on.
- are in short supply globally and should be prioritised for health workers, people with COVID-19 symptoms, and those caring for people with COVID-19 symptoms.
- should be used by at-risk groups (including those aged over 60 and anyone with pre-existing medical conditions), when they cannot guarantee a distance of one meter from others.

Both fabric and medical-grade face masks are only effective when used correctly. They should be used alongside other prevention measures, such as physical distancing where possible, frequent handwashing and avoiding touching your face or mask. The World Health Organization has a series of videos and infographics on how to wear different types of masks. You can make your own fabric face mask by following this guide from the US CDC.

What is social or physical distancing?

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, people are advised to keep their distance from others. The exact advice on how to do this will vary between countries. In some places, people have been asked to stop shaking hands and avoid large gatherings. Other places are advising people to stay at home completely and only leave the house to exercise, shop for essentials and go to work (if you can’t work at home).

The aim of this advice is to slow the spread of the virus by reducing the number of people you meet in a day. This will help the health system by preventing a large number of critical care patients presenting at the same time.
What should I do if I have COVID-19 symptoms?

- Stay at home and call your local health service. Don't visit a clinic.
- Ask your friends or neighbours to leave supplies outside your house.
- Avoid close contact with others. Try to stay at least one metre away.
- If you live with someone more vulnerable try to arrange for them to stay elsewhere.
- Mild symptoms can be managed with resting, drinking liquids and paracetamol.
- If your symptoms don't improve after 7 days or if you have difficulty breathing call your local health service.

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Sources:
UNAIDS
CDC