



Frequently Asked Questions: COVID-19

May 14, 2020

What is COVID-19, formerly the 2019 Novel Coronavirus disease?

The COVID-19 is a new respiratory disease caused by SARS CoV-2, formerly known as 2019-nCoV, that was first identified in Wuhan, China in December of 2019.

What is a coronavirus?

Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases. Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) are examples of diseases caused by coronaviruses. There are ongoing investigations to learn more.

Is COVID-19 the same as the MERS or SARS?

No. The COVID-19 is a new disease caused by a coronavirus that is different than the one that causes Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). However, genetic analyses suggest this virus emerged from a virus related to SARS. This is a rapidly evolving situation and information will be updated as it becomes available.

How does COVID-19 spread?

COVID-19 is caused by a respiratory virus. It can spread from an infected person to another person through respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes on someone who is within 6 feet. It is like how influenza or other respiratory germs spread. 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. Current evidence suggests that COVID-19 may remain viable for hours to days on surfaces made from a variety of materials, but once dried on the surface it is not likely to cause infection. Routine cleaning and sanitizing are sufficient to remove any remaining risk for transmission from wet or dry surfaces.

What are the symptoms and possible complications?

People with COVID-19 have reported mild to severe respiratory illness with symptoms of fever, cough, and shortness of breath. Additional symptoms such as chills, and loss sense of taste and smell have also been reported. In severe cases, it can cause pneumonia.

Who is at risk for serious complications from COVID-19?

Some people are at higher risk of getting very sick from this illness. This includes:

- Older adults
- People who have underlying health condition including but not limited to heart disease, diabetes, lung disease, obesity

If you are at higher risk of getting very sick from COVID-19, you should:

- Stock up on supplies, including medications.
- Take everyday precautions to keep space between yourself and others.
- When you go out in public, keep away from others who are sick, limit close contact (within 6 feet) and wash your hands often.
- Avoid crowds as much as possible.
- Avoid cruise travel and non-essential air travel.

- During a COVID-19 outbreak in your community, stay home as much as possible to further reduce your risk of being exposed.

Are pregnant women at higher risk for complications from COVID-19?

Pregnant women may be at increased risk for more severe disease from infection with the virus of COVID-19. Until more information is available, it is always important for pregnant women to protect themselves from illnesses.

When will symptoms appear?

Symptoms may appear between 2 and 14 days after initial exposure. People are mostly infectious when they present with (flu-like) symptoms, and are coughing, sneezing and producing infected droplets.

How is COVID-19 treated?

Treatment is supportive care and relief of symptoms. There is currently no vaccine to protect people from this novel coronavirus. There is also no specific anti-viral treatment.

How can I help protect myself?

The best way to prevent infection is to avoid being exposed to this virus. BPHC recommends the same precautions to prevent the spread of other respiratory viruses, like those that cause the flu or a cold:

- Wash your hands often 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.
- If there is no soap and water, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Do not share drinks, food, or eating utensils.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with your sleeve (not your hands), or a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.
- Avoid spitting in public.
- Get a flu shot.

Does wearing a mask prevent the spread of COVID-19?

A facemask or face covering should be worn by anyone above the age of 2 when they are outside their home to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It is especially important for people with suspected or confirmed respiratory symptoms of COVID-19 or other respiratory viruses to wear a face covering because it will help protect others from getting infected. A facemask should also be worn by health care workers and people who are taking care of someone with suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

How do I know if I was exposed?

You generally need to be in close contact with a sick person to get infected. Close contact includes:

- Living in the same household as a sick person with COVID-19,
- Caring for a sick person with COVID-19
- Being within 6 feet of a sick person with COVID-19 for about 10 minutes, OR
- Being in direct contact with secretions from a sick person with COVID-19 (e.g., being coughed on, kissing, sharing utensils, etc.).

If you have not been in close contact with a sick person with COVID-19, you are considered to be at low risk for infection. If you have been in close contact, you should stay away from others for 14 days and monitor for signs of illness. On occasion, someone who does not have symptoms or hasn't developed symptoms yet may be able to spread infection, but the risk for spread is less than from someone with symptoms who is producing more infected secretions. In any case, under current circumstances, everyone should monitor their health and stay away from others if you get sick and wear a face covering when outside the home.

What should I do if I had close contact with someone who has COVID-19?

If you are a Boston resident, you will be contacted by BPHC if you are identified as a close contact of someone diagnosed with COVID-19. If you live outside of Boston, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) and/or your local health department will contact you. You will be asked to monitor yourself from the time that you had contact with that person. If you develop fever or any other symptoms, call your health care provider. You should avoid other people and public places for 14 days after exposure.

Do I need to be tested for COVID-19?

If you have symptoms of this virus, you should call your health care provider. Your health care provider will assess your symptoms and possibility of exposure and will determine if you should be tested. It is especially important to be tested if you are an individual at high risk such as:

- Older adults, age 60 years or over
- People with underlying health conditions
- People with weakened immune systems

If you are a health care worker in contact with patients or other health care workers, or if you are a first responder (EMS, fire, police), you need to be tested regardless of the high-risk criteria if you become symptomatic. There are currently no medications to treat COVID-19.

How is a person tested for COVID-19?

If you have symptoms like those described above, contact your primary care provider BY PHONE. If you do not have a primary care provider, go to the nearest clinic, urgent care site or emergency department depending on how sick you are. Contact the clinic, urgent care site or emergency department BY PHONE prior to arrival. Your healthcare provider will go over options for how and where to get tested.

What should I do if I am a close contact to someone with COVID-19 and get sick?

If you get sick with fever, cough or shortness of breath (even if your symptoms are very mild), you should stay at home and away from other people. Call your healthcare provider and tell them that you were exposed to someone with COVID-19. There are currently no medications to treat COVID-19 except for treating hospitalized patients (the intravenous drug, remdesivir). If you have a medical emergency and need to call 911, notify the dispatch personnel that you may have been exposed to COVID-19. If possible, put on a facemask before emergency medical services arrive or immediately after they arrive.

If I recently traveled to an area with widespread transmission and am sick, what should I do?

If you traveled to an area with widespread transmission of COVID-19 in the last 14 days, you should isolate yourself until 14 days after you returned. If you feel sick with fever (38°C/ 100.4 °F), cough, or difficulty breathing, you should:

- Seek medical care right away. Before you go to a health care provider's office or emergency room, call ahead and tell them about your recent travel and your symptoms.
- Avoid contact with others and wear a face covering when in unavoidable contact with others.
- Do not travel while sick.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve (not your hands) when coughing or sneezing.
- Wear a surgical type face mask if you have one or as soon as you get to a healthcare facility that can supply one.
- Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available.
- For medical emergencies (e.g., shortness of breath, chest pain): call 911; notify the dispatcher you may have COVID-19.

If you are diagnosed with COVID-19, for how long will you be isolated?

Patients with confirmed COVID-19 infection should remain under home isolation until the risk for transmission to others is thought to be low. Patients with severe medical conditions requiring hospitalization will not be sent home until they are medically stable. The decision to discontinue home isolation precautions should be made on a case-by-case basis, in consultation with healthcare providers and state and local health departments. Currently, people with COVID-19 are isolated for a minimum of 10 days, as long as they are without fever and have improvement in other symptoms for at least 3 full days or until they have two negative tests for the virus.

What should I do to keep my infection from spreading to my family and other people in the community?

Stay home except to get medical care

You should restrict activities outside your home, except for getting medical care. Do not go to work, school, or public areas. Avoid using public transportation, ride-sharing, or taxis. Separate yourself from other people and animals in your home.

People: As much as possible, you should stay in a specific room and away from other people in your home. Also, you should use a separate bathroom, if available. Do not share food, drinks, and utensils.

Animals: See [COVID-19 and Animals](#) for more information.

Call ahead before visiting your doctor

If you have a medical appointment, call the healthcare provider and tell them that you have symptoms that are consistent with COVID-19. This will help the healthcare provider's office take steps to keep other people from getting infected or exposed.

Wear a facemask or face covering

You should wear a facemask or other face covering when you are around other people (e.g., sharing a room or vehicle) or pets and before you enter a healthcare provider's office. If you are not able to wear a mask (for example, because it causes trouble breathing), then people who live with you should not be in the same room with you, or they should wear a mask if they enter your room.

Cover your coughs and sneezes

Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw used tissues in a lined trash can; immediately wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol, covering all surfaces of

your hands and rubbing them together until they feel dry. Soap and water should be used if hands are visibly dirty.

Avoid sharing personal household items

You should not share dishes, drinking glasses, cups, eating utensils, towels, or bedding with other people or pets in your home. After using these items, they should be washed thoroughly with soap and water.

Clean your hands often

Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol, covering all surfaces of your hands and rubbing them together until they feel dry. Soap and water is preferred if hands are visibly dirty. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.

Clean all “high-touch” surfaces every day

High touch surfaces include counters, tabletops, doorknobs, bathroom fixtures, toilets, phones, keyboards, tablets, and bedside tables. Also, clean any surfaces that may have blood, stool, or body fluids on them. Use a household cleaning spray or wipe, according to the label instructions. Labels contain instructions for safe and effective use of the cleaning product including precautions you should take when applying the product, such as wearing gloves and making sure you have good ventilation during use of the product.

Monitor your symptoms

Seek prompt medical attention if your illness is worsening (e.g., difficulty breathing). Before seeking care, call your healthcare provider and tell them that your symptoms are consistent with COVID-19. Put on a facemask before you enter the facility. These steps will help the healthcare provider’s office to keep other people in the office or waiting room from getting your infection.

If you have a medical emergency and need to call 911, notify the dispatch personnel that you have symptoms consistent with COVID-19. If possible, put on a facemask or face covering before emergency medical services arrive.

Discontinuing home isolation

Criteria for ending home isolation for people with COVID-19 are based on guidelines from CDC. Your local or state health department will advise you about when it is safe to end isolation.

After being exposed to someone with COVID-19, when can employees return to work?

Anyone who has been exposed to someone with COVID-19 during the past 14 days will have some level of restrictions on their movements. Social distancing means remaining out of public places where close contact with others may occur (e.g., shopping centers, movie theaters, stadiums), workplaces (unless the person works in an office space that allows distancing from others), schools and other classroom settings, and local public conveyances (e.g., bus, subway, taxi, ride share) for the duration of the 14-day period during which symptoms are likely to occur if infection is present unless presence in such locations is approved by the state or local health department. These restrictions are to be in effect for 14 days from the time the person was possibly exposed. Contact your local or state health department if you have further questions.

What about travel?

COVID-19 is reported all over the world, including all states in the US. There are travel restrictions in effect in a large part of the world. Avoid travel. Postpone planned trips.

Can I travel to other places? Countries?

Currently, the CDC recommends travelers avoid all nonessential travel. For the latest information on the affected geographic areas with widespread or sustained community transmission of COVID-19, visit <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html>.

How is Boston monitoring people arriving from countries with widespread transmission of COVID-19?

People arriving from countries with widespread transmission of COVID-19 in the past 14 days are being asked to monitor for symptoms of fever, shortness of breath and cough. If you have traveled to one of these affected areas and develop symptoms, call your health care provider.

Am I at risk for COVID-19 from a package or products shipped from China or elsewhere?

There is no evidence that COVID-19 or any other coronavirus can be spread through goods imported from China or elsewhere. There have not been any cases of COVID-19 infection in the United States associated with imported goods.

Can I catch COVID-19 from my pet?

While this virus seems to have emerged from an animal source, it is now spreading from person-to-person. Although there is some evidence that certain domestic and wild animals may get infected with SARS-CoV-2, at this time, there is no evidence that pets, such as cats and dogs, in the United States can spread COVID-19 to people.

If you have the flu shot, you don't have to worry about COVID-19, correct?

The flu vaccine only provides protection against the flu, not other viruses. There is currently no vaccine against COVID-19.

Can I get the COVID-19 from the air through my building ventilation system?

COVID-19 is spread from person-to-person among close contacts (about 6 feet). Person-to-person spread is thought to occur mainly via respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes, like how influenza and other respiratory pathogens spread. At this time, there is no reason to believe COVID-19 is spread through ventilation systems.

Some social media posts suggest you protect yourself from COVID-19 by swallowing or gargling with bleach, taking acetic acid or steroids, or using essential oils, saltwater, ethanol or other substances. Is that true?

No, and some of these can be very dangerous. There is no evidence that these strategies can protect you from getting sick from COVID-19. The best ways to protect yourself from COVID-19 (and other respiratory viruses) include:

- Washing your hands frequently and thoroughly using soap and water.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with your sleeve (not your hands), or a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Avoiding close contact with people who are sick, sneezing or coughing.
- Get information from a reliable source like the World Health Organization, the CDC or your local or state health department.

What is the City of Boston doing to address COVID-19?

BPHC is working with local, state, and national partners in an ongoing way on guidance for different business and other sectors as the situation continues to change and will communicate with the public as specific guidance is available. In the meantime, we continue to encourage everyone to practice social

distancing and hand hygiene and cough etiquette, stay home, and if you're sick follow the recommendations to prevent the spread of respiratory illnesses.

What should groups do about the risk for COVID-19?

All large events should be postponed or cancelled.

If you can't avoid bringing groups of people together, make these adjustments:

- No more than 10 people should gather.
- People who are sick should not attend.
- Try to find ways to give people more physical space so that they aren't in close contact as much as possible. (6 feet is recommended.)
- Discourage touching including shaking hands, hugging, etc.
- Do not share food, drinks, or utensils at any gatherings.

During an essential event (as an event in support of COVID-19 response):

- message assertively about COVID-19
- promote practices that stop the spread of germs
- ensure adequate access to sinks with soap, hand sanitizer and tissue
- plan for staff absences
- identify a space that can be used to isolate staff or participants who become ill at the event.

If I have a question about COVID-19, who should I contact?

For more information on COVID-19, you can visit www.bphc.org/2019ncov or call 617-534-5050.

What is the Community Tracing Collaborative (CTC)?

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, along with Partners in Health, created the COVID-19 Community Tracing Collaborative (CTC). The goal of the program is to keep the community healthy and slow the spread of the virus by conducting contact tracing, so those at risk from exposure will be made aware and take action to prevent others from getting COVID-19. CTC staff will reach out to the contacts of confirmed positive COVID-19 patients to offer counseling and assistance.

How can I verify CTC staff is calling?

Phone calls will use the prefix 833 and 857 and your phone will say the call is from "MA COVID Team." Calls will be made daily from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

What happens during the call if I am diagnosed with COVID-19?

CTC staff will ask you for a list of all of the people you were within six feet of during the two days before you had symptoms. If you don't have symptoms, you will be asked about your activity during the two days before you had a positive test. They will also ask for the phone numbers of anyone you tell them about, so they can be called and cared for. Contacts will be reached out and told that they have been exposed to COVID-19 so they can get tested, but information about who they were exposed to will not be shared. If you are staying at home during the isolation period, CTC staff will also discuss any needs you may have and may connect you with a care resource coordinator who will help you get the support you need. Throughout your illness, CTC staff will check in to monitor your symptoms and needs.



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