

Patient education: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is COVID-19?

Coronavirus disease 2019, or "COVID-19," is an infection caused by a specific type of virus. It first appeared in late 2019 in the city of Wuhan, China. This infection was called "2019 novel coronavirus" until the World Health Organization (WHO) gave it a new name in February 2020. People with COVID-19 can have fever, cough, and trouble breathing. Problems with breathing happen when the infection affects the lungs and causes pneumonia ([figure 1](#)).

Most cases of COVID-19 are in China. But there have been cases in other places, too, including in the United States. Most of these happened when people got the infection in China and then traveled to other countries.

Some people probably got the infection from animals that had the virus. But it can also be spread through contact with other people who had the virus.

Experts are studying this new virus and will continue to learn more about it over time.

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

Symptoms usually start a few days after a person is infected with the virus. But in some people it can take even longer for symptoms to appear.

Symptoms can include:

- Fever

- Cough
- Trouble breathing
- Feeling tired
- Muscle aches

Some people have no symptoms, or only have mild symptoms. But in other people, COVID-19 can lead to serious problems like pneumonia, not getting enough oxygen, or even death. This is more common in people who have other health problems.

Should I see a doctor or nurse?

If you have a fever with cough or trouble breathing and might have been exposed to COVID-19, call your doctor or nurse. You might have been exposed if you lived in or visited China in the 14 days before you got sick, or if you have been around a person who has the virus.

If your symptoms are not severe, it is best to call your doctor, nurse, or clinic before you go in. They can tell you what to do and where to go. If you do need to go to the clinic or hospital, you will need to put on a face mask. The staff might also have you wait some place away from other people.

If you are severely ill and need to go to the clinic or hospital right away, you should still call ahead. This way the staff can care for you while taking steps to protect others.

Your doctor or nurse will do an exam and ask about your symptoms. They will also ask questions about where you live, and whether you have had contact with people who might be sick or with animals.

Will I need tests?

Yes. If your doctor or nurse suspects you have COVID-19, they will do tests on samples of fluid taken from inside your nose and mouth. They might also test fluid from your lungs, as well as your urine and stool (bowel movements). These tests can all show if you have COVID-19 or another infection.

Your doctor might also order a chest X-ray to check your lungs.

How is COVID-19 treated?

Many people with COVID-19 have only mild illness and can rest at home until they get better. If you have more severe illness, you might need to stay in the hospital, possibly in the intensive care unit (also called the "ICU"). There is no specific treatment for the infection, but the doctors and nurses in the hospital can monitor and support your breathing and other body functions, and make you as comfortable as possible.

You might need extra oxygen to help you breathe easily. If you are having a very hard time breathing, you might need to be put on a ventilator. This is a machine to help you breathe.

Can COVID-19 be prevented?

There are things you can do to reduce your chances of getting COVID-19.

Some experts recommend avoiding travel to China if it is not necessary. If you do live or travel there, try to stay away from people who have any of the symptoms of COVID-19. You can also protect yourself by washing your hands with soap and water often. The table has instructions on how to wash your hands to prevent spreading illness ([table 1](#)).

You can also lower your risk of infection by avoiding animals and markets that sell animal products. Do not eat raw meat, and do not eat food that might have been in

contact with animals without washing, peeling, or boiling it first.

If someone in your home has COVID-19, there are things you can do to protect yourself:

- Keep the sick person away from others – The sick person should stay in a separate room and use a separate bathroom if possible.
- Use face masks – The sick person should wear a face mask when they are in the same room as other people. If you are caring for the sick person, you can also protect yourself by wearing a face mask when you are in the room. This is especially important if the sick person cannot wear a mask.
- Be extra careful around body fluids – If you will be in contact with the sick person's blood, mucus, or other body fluids, wear a disposable face mask, gown, and gloves. If any body fluids touch your skin, wash your hands with soap right away.
- Clean often – It's especially important to clean things that are touched a lot. This includes counters, bedside tables, doorknobs, computers, phones, and bathroom surfaces.
- Wash hands – Wash your hands with soap and water often ([table 1](#)).

As we learn more about this virus, expert recommendations will continue to change. Check with your doctor or public health official to get the most updated information about how to protect yourself.

You can also find more information about COVID-19 at the following websites:

- United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): www.cdc.gov
- World Health Organization (WHO): www.who.int

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This topic retrieved from UpToDate on: Feb 27, 2020.

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Topic 126678 Version 4.0

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