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PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# Managing COVID-19 at Home: Information for Caregivers

This information explains what to do at home if you're taking care of someone who has or might have COVID-19. In this resource, the phrase "the patient" means the person you're taking care of.

Avoid caring for someone who has COVID-19 if you have any chronic medical conditions or a weak immune system. If you have questions about whether you should be taking care of someone who has or might have COVID-19, talk with your healthcare provider.

## Help the Patient Manage Their Symptoms

You can help the patient manage their symptoms by bringing them over-the-counter cold medications, light meals, and lots of liquids. You should also make sure their temperature is measured 2 times a day. For more information about managing COVID-19 symptoms, read the resource *Managing COVID-19 at Home* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/covid-home](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/covid-home)).

Make sure you know how to contact the patient's healthcare provider. Call their healthcare provider right away if:

- They have trouble breathing when they're resting.
- They have trouble breathing when they walk short distances. An example of a short distance is walking from one room to another, about 25 feet (7.6 meters).
- They're getting chemotherapy and have a new fever of 100.4 °F (38 °C) or higher.
- They have a fever of 102 °F (38.9 °C) or higher that lasts for 24 hours

and does not get better after they take acetaminophen (Tylenol®).

- They have blood in their sputum (mucus they cough up).
- They have chest pain.
- They have a very bad headache.
- You or they have questions or concerns.

## **Keep COVID-19 From Spreading**

COVID-19 can easily be passed from one to person to another. It can spread in droplets in the air or left on surfaces after a sick person coughs or sneezes. It can also spread if someone touches a sick person and then touches their eyes, nose, or mouth.

Follow the instructions in this section to help keep COVID-19 from spreading to other people in your home and community.

### **Types of COVID-19 tests**

There are currently 2 types of tests used to diagnose COVID-19.

- A PCR test, also called a molecular test. PCR tests are very accurate, but it can take a few days to get results.
- A rapid test, also called an antigen test. It usually takes less than an hour to get rapid test results. But rapid tests are more likely than PCR tests to have a false negative result. This means rapid tests are more likely to show a person does not have COVID-19 when they actually do. If the patient has COVID-19 symptoms and gets a negative rapid test result, it's best if they get a PCR test to make sure.

With both types of tests, the patient will get either a positive or negative result. A positive result means the test showed they have COVID-19. A negative result means the test did not show they have COVID-19.

## When to follow these instructions

- If the patient has COVID-19 symptoms and is waiting for their test results, follow these instructions until:
  - They get their test results and they are negative. If they had a rapid test and get a negative result, they should get a PCR test to check their results. Keep following these instructions until they get a negative PCR test result.
- If the patient does not have symptoms and is waiting for their test results, follow these instructions until:
  - They get their test results and they are negative.
- If the patient has COVID-19 and has symptoms, keep following these instructions until:
  - They have not had a fever above 100.4 °F (38 °C) for at least 3 days without using medication to lower fevers. Examples of these medications include acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil®), naproxen (Aleve®), full-dose aspirin (more than 81 mg daily), and indomethacin (Tivorbex®). It's OK if the patient takes baby aspirin (81 milligrams (mg) per day) if their healthcare provider told them to.
  - Their breathing problems have gotten better or their breathing is back to usual.
  - It has been 10 or more days since their first positive COVID-19 test.
- If the patient has COVID-19 but does not have symptoms, keep following these instructions until:
  - It has been 10 or more days since their first positive COVID-19 test.

If any of the the patient's COVID-19 symptoms come back, start following these instructions again right away and call their healthcare provider.

Some people may be infectious for a long time after they have COVID-19. This means they can still spread the virus to other people, even if they do not have any symptoms. The patient may still be infectious if:

- They had a very serious case of COVID-19 and were in the hospital.
- They have a very weak immune system (for example, if they have a blood cancer like lymphoma or leukemia).
- They recently had a stem cell transplant.

If the patient has a very weak immune system or recently had a stem cell transplant, talk with their healthcare provider. They may need to get a PCR or rapid test to make sure they're not still infectious.

## **Avoid contact with the patient as much as you can**

- Have the patient stay in one room away from other people and pets as much as they can.
- Have the patient use a separate bathroom, if they have one.
- Do not share electronics (such as a cell phone or tablet), dishes, drinking glasses, cups, eating utensils, towels, or bedding with the patient.
- If you need to be in the same room as the patient:
  - Stay at least 6 feet (2 meters) away as much as you can.
  - Wear a properly-fitted mask over your nose and mouth, if you can.
  - Open the window and turn on a fan to help air flow.

## **Clean your hands often**

- Clean your hands before and after you touch the the patient, touch anything that's directly around the patient, or go into the room the patient is staying in.
  - If you're washing your hands with soap and water, wet your hands and apply soap. Rub your hands together well for at least 20 seconds, then rinse. Dry your hands with a disposable towel and use that same towel to turn off the faucet. If you do not have disposable towels, it's OK to use clean cloth towels. Replace them when they're wet.
  - If you're using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, be sure to cover all of your hands with it, rubbing them together until they're dry.

## **Wear a properly-fitted mask, gloves, or both**

- Wear a properly-fitted mask over your nose and mouth when you're in the same room as the patient. To take off the mask:
  1. Untie it without touching the front.
  2. Put it with your dirty laundry. If you're using a disposable mask (mask you only use once), throw it away in a waste bin with a liner and lid.
  3. Clean your hands right away.

For more information about wearing a mask, read the articles and .

- Use disposable gloves when you touch the patient's dirty dishes, eating utensils, or laundry or handle or throw away trash. Throw away the gloves in a waste bin with a liner and lid. Then, clean your hands right away.
- Use disposable gloves and a properly-fitting mask when handling the patient's body fluids, such as mucus, saliva (spit), and stool (poop). To take off the gloves and mask:
  1. Take off the gloves first. Throw them away in a waste bin with a liner and lid.
  2. Clean your hands.
  3. Take off the mask. Untie it without touching the front, then put it with your dirty laundry. If you're using a disposable mask, throw it away in a waste bin with a liner and lid.
  4. Clean your hands again.

Do not reuse disposable masks or gloves. Put used masks, gloves, and other waste into a waste bin with a liner and lid.

## **Clean and disinfect**

- Only clean and disinfect surfaces the patient touches (such as in their bedroom or bathroom) when you need to. Wait as long as you can after they have touched the surface. Wear a properly-fitting mask and gloves.

- If you're sharing a bathroom with the patient, clean and disinfect it every time they use it. Wait as long as you can after they use it.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces you touch often (such as phones, remote controls, counters, tabletops, doorknobs, bathroom fixtures, toilets, keyboards, tablets, and bedside tables) every day.
  - If the area is dirty, clean it with soap and water or a household cleaning spray or wipe. Then, use a household disinfectant. Follow the instructions on the label.
- Wash the patient's used dishes, drinking glasses, cups, and eating utensils with soap and hot water or in a dishwasher.
- Keep the patient's dirty laundry in a laundry bag. Do not shake the patient's dirty laundry. Wash it following the instructions on the label using the warmest water setting you can. Dry it well. Use the hot setting, if you can. It's OK to mix the patient's laundry with other laundry.

## Tips for Managing Stress

It's normal to feel worried about COVID-19, especially if you or your loved one is sick. You can take care of yourself by doing things such as:

- Calling or video chatting with a friend or loved one.
- Starting a new hobby or doing an activity you usually don't have time for.
- Taking a break from the news.

MSK has many professionals, volunteers, and support programs that can help you cope during this time. For more information and more tips for managing stress, read the resource *Managing Stress and Anxiety Caused by COVID-19* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/stress\\_anxiety\\_covid](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/stress_anxiety_covid)).

## Additional Resources

For more information about what to do if you or a person in your home has COVID-19, visit [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick). For the latest information about how MSK is prepared for COVID-19, visit

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

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