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PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# Managing COVID-19 at Home

This information explains what to do at home if you have or might have COVID-19.

## About COVID-19

COVID-19 is a viral illness that can affect your lungs and airways. Symptoms of COVID-19 may be mild or severe. They can include:

- Fever above 100.4 °F (38 °C) or chills.
- Cough.
- Breathing problems, such as shortness of breath or chest tightness.
- Fatigue (feeling very tired or having very little energy).
- Muscle or body aches.
- Headaches.
- Lost sense of taste or smell.
- Sore throat.
- Stuffy (congested) or runny nose.

- Nausea (feeling like you're going to throw up) or vomiting (throwing up).
- Diarrhea (loose or watery bowel movements).

You may start to notice symptoms 2 to 14 days after you're exposed to the virus. Your symptoms may last for 1 to 3 weeks. In general, people with cancer do not have different symptoms than other people.

Some people who have COVID-19 do not have any symptoms (are asymptomatic). Even if you do not have symptoms, you can still spread the virus to other people.

Many people have a cough for several weeks after having a viral illness such as COVID-19. As long as your cough is the same or getting better, you do not need to worry. Cough into your elbow or cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough. If your cough gets worse, you have blood in your sputum (mucus that you cough up) that you have not had before, or you start coughing up more sputum, call your healthcare provider.

## **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 your results.

- A **rapid test**, also called an antigen test. It usually takes less than an hour to get your 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 you do not have COVID-19 when you actually do. If you have COVID-19 symptoms and get a negative rapid test result, it's best to get a PCR test to make sure.

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

## **How to manage your COVID-19 symptoms**

It's helpful to keep a daily journal of your symptoms and the medicines you use to manage them. This will help you see how your symptoms are changing over time. This can be useful if you need to contact or visit your healthcare provider.

**If you use a device for sleep apnea (such as a CPAP machine) or a home nebulizer, talk with your healthcare provider before using it. These devices may spread the virus that causes COVID-19.**

## Medicine

- You can use acetaminophen (Tylenol®) to help treat fever, body aches, and headaches.
  - Do not take more than 3 grams (g) of acetaminophen in 1 day. Taking too much can harm your liver.
  - Acetaminophen is a very common ingredient in over-the-counter and prescription medicines. Always read the label on the medicines you're taking. The full name acetaminophen is not always written out. For a list of common medicines containing acetaminophen and abbreviations for acetaminophen, read the section "About acetaminophen" in *How To Check if a Medicine or Supplement Has Aspirin, Other NSAIDs, Vitamin E, or Fish Oil* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/check-med-supplement](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/check-med-supplement)).
- Over-the-counter cold medicines will not make COVID-19 go away faster, but they can help if you're coughing, have a sore throat, or have nasal congestion (a stuffy nose). Do not use a decongestant if you have high blood pressure.
- Antibiotics will not make COVID-19 go away faster. Do not take antibiotics unless your healthcare provider

tells you to.

If you have COVID-19 but do not have symptoms, do not take cold medicines, acetaminophen (Tylenol), or over-the-counter nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen (Advil<sup>®</sup>) and naproxen (Aleve<sup>®</sup>). These medicines may hide the symptoms of COVID-19.

It's OK to take baby aspirin (81 milligrams (mg) per day) if your healthcare provider told you to. If you think you need to take a higher dose, talk with your healthcare provider.

### **Keep track of your temperature**

Measure your temperature 2 times every day: once in the morning and once in the evening.

- If you're getting chemotherapy (chemo) and have a new fever of 100.4 °F (38 °C) or higher, call your healthcare provider.
- If you have a fever of 102 °F (38.9 °C) or higher that lasts for 24 hours and does not get better after you take acetaminophen, call your healthcare provider.

## **Eating and drinking**

- Eat light meals. For example, have 6 small meals throughout the day instead of 3 big ones. This will help with nausea and appetite loss.
- Drink 6 to 8 (8-ounce) cups of liquids every day. This will help you stay hydrated and help loosen mucus in your nose and lungs. Water, sports drinks, carbonated (fizzy) drinks without caffeine, juices, tea, and soup are good choices.

## **How to avoid spreading COVID-19**

COVID-19 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 people in your home and community.

### **While you're waiting for your test results:**

- If you have COVID-19 symptoms, follow these instructions until you get your test results and they are negative. If you took a rapid test and get a negative result, get a PCR test to check your results. Keep following these instructions until you get a

negative PCR test result.

- If you do not have COVID-19 symptoms, follow these instructions until you get your test results and they are negative.

### **If you test positive for COVID-19:**

- If you have symptoms, follow these instructions until:
  - You have not had a fever above 100.4 °F (38 °C) for at least 3 days and are not using medicine to lower fevers. Examples of these medicines include acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil), naproxen (Aleve), full-dose aspirin (more than 81 mg daily), and indomethacin (Tivorbex®).
  - Your breathing problems have gotten better or your breathing is back to usual.
  - It has been 10 or more days since your first positive COVID-19 test.
- If you do not have symptoms, follow these instructions until it has been 10 or more days since your first positive COVID-19 test.

If any of your COVID-19 symptoms come back, start following these instructions again right away and call your 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. You may still be infectious if:

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

If you have a very weak immune system or recently had a stem cell transplant, talk with your healthcare provider. You may need to get a PCR or rapid test to make sure you're not still infectious.

## **Stay home except to get medical care**

- Avoid doing anything outside your home except getting medical care.
  - Do not go to work, school, or other public areas.
  - Avoid using public transportation, ride-sharing services, and taxis.
- If you need to go outside your home, wear a properly-fitted mask over your nose and mouth, if you can.
- If you need medical care, call your healthcare



provider first to tell them you're coming.

## **Separate yourself from other people in your home**

- Choose a room in your home. Stay in that room away from other people and pets as much as you can.
- Use a separate bathroom, if you have one.
- At least once a day, clean and disinfect the surfaces you touch often (such as phones, remote controls, doorknobs, bathroom fixtures, toilets, keyboards, tablets, counters, tabletops, and bedside tables). If the surface is dirty, use soap and water or a household cleaning spray or wipe first. Then use a household disinfectant. Follow the instructions on the label.
- Do not let anyone visit you.
- If you need to be near people or pets in your home:
  - Stay at least 6 feet (2 meters) away as much as you can.
  - Wear a properly-fitted mask, if you can.
  - Open the window and turn on a fan to help air flow.

## **Choosing a caregiver**

If you need help, choose one person in your home to be your caregiver. Your caregiver should be healthy. They should not have any chronic (long-lasting) medical conditions or a weak immune system. It's best if your

caregiver is fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

Your caregiver should follow the instructions in *Managing COVID-19 at Home: Information for Caregivers* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/covid\\_home\\_caregivers](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/covid_home_caregivers)).

## **Wear a properly-fitted mask**

- Wear a properly-fitted mask over your nose and mouth if you need to be around other people or pets, even at home. You do not need to wear a mask when you're alone.
- Do not wear a mask if you have breathing problems when you wear it or if you cannot take it off by yourself.

## **Cover your coughs and sneezes**

- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Put your used tissues in a waste bin with a liner and lid.
- Clean your hands right away after you cough or sneeze.
  - 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 paper towel and use that same towel to turn off the faucet. If you do not have

paper 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 parts of your hands with it. Rub your hands together until they're dry.

## **Avoid sharing personal household items**

- Do not share electronics (such as a cell phone or tablet), dishes, drinking glasses, cups, eating utensils, towels, or bedding with other people or pets in your home.
- Wash used dishes, drinking glasses, cups, and eating utensils well with soap and hot water or in a dishwasher.
- Keep your dirty laundry in a laundry bag. Do not shake your 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 your 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 do not 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 *Managing Stress and Anxiety Caused by COVID-19* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/stress\\_anxiety\\_covid](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/stress_anxiety_covid)).

## **When to contact your healthcare provider**

Call your healthcare provider right away if:

- You have trouble breathing when you're resting.
- You have trouble breathing when you walk short distances. An example of a short distance is walking from one room to another, about 25 feet (7.6 meters).
- You're getting chemotherapy and have a new fever of 100.4 °F (38 °C) or higher.
- You have a fever of 102 °F (38.9 °C) or higher that lasts for 24 hours and does not get better after you take acetaminophen.
- You have blood in your sputum.
- You have chest pain.
- You have a very bad headache.

- You have questions or concerns.

Visit [www.cdc.gov/covid](http://www.cdc.gov/covid) for more information about what to do if you or a person in your home has COVID-19. Visit [www.msk.org/coronavirus](http://www.msk.org/coronavirus) for the latest information about how MSK is prepared for COVID-19.

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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Managing COVID-19 at Home - Last updated on January 12, 2022  
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