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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 don't have different symptoms than other people.

Some people who have COVID-19 don't have any symptoms (are asymptomatic). Even if you don't 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 don't 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 haven't 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 don't 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 didn't show you have COVID-19.

## How to Manage Your Symptoms

It's helpful to keep a daily journal of your symptoms and the medications 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.**

## Medications

- You can use acetaminophen (Tylenol®) to help treat fever, body aches, and headaches.
  - Don't 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 medications. Always read the label on the medications you're taking. The full name acetaminophen isn't always written out. For a list of common medications containing acetaminophen and abbreviations for acetaminophen, read the section "About Acetaminophen" in our resource *Common Medications Containing Aspirin, Other Nonsteroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs), or Vitamin E* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/common\\_meds](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/common_meds)).
- Over-the-counter cold medications won't 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). Don't use a decongestant if you have high blood pressure.
- Antibiotics won't make COVID-19 go away faster. Don't take antibiotics unless your healthcare provider tells you to.

If you have COVID-19 but don't have symptoms, don't take cold medications, acetaminophen (Tylenol), or over-the-counter nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen (Advil®) and naproxen (Aleve®). These medications 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 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 doesn't 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) glasses 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 easily be passed from one 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 people in your home and community.

- If you have COVID-19 symptoms and are waiting for your test results, follow these instructions until:
  - You get your test results and they're negative. If you had 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 don't have COVID-19 symptoms and are waiting for your test results, follow these instructions until:
  - You get your test results and they're negative.

- If you have COVID-19 and have symptoms, follow these instructions until:
  - You haven't had a fever above 100.4 °F (38 °C) for at least 3 days and aren't 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®).
  - Your breathing problems have gotten better or your breathing is back to usual.
  - You have a negative PCR test 10 or more days after your first positive test **or** it's been 4 or more weeks since your first positive COVID-19 test.
- If you have COVID-19 but don't have symptoms, follow these instructions until:
  - You have a negative PCR test 10 or more days after your first positive test **or** it's been 4 or more weeks since your first positive COVID-19 test and you haven't developed any symptoms.

If any of your COVID-19 symptoms come back, start following these instructions again right away and call your healthcare provider.

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

- Avoid doing anything outside your home except getting medical care.
  - Don't 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 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.
- Don't 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 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 shouldn't 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 our resource *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 mask

- Wear a mask over your nose and mouth if you need to be around other people or pets, even at home. You don't need to wear a mask when you're alone.
- Don't wear a mask if you have breathing problems when you wear it or if you can't 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 don't 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

- Don't share 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 water or a dishwasher.
- Keep your dirty laundry in a laundry bag. Don't shake your dirty laundry. Wash it using regular laundry soap on the hottest setting available. Dry it well.

## 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 our resource *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 doesn't 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.

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](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick). For the latest information about how MSK is prepared for COVID-19, visit [www.mskcc.org/coronavirus](https://www.mskcc.org/coronavirus)

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

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

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