

# WHAT PEOPLE WITH CANCER NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)



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## Introduction

The coronavirus can infect anyone, young or old, healthy or frail. People with cancer and other serious health conditions, and their loved ones, need to be especially careful. Here's what you need to know.

People who are over 60 or who have cancer and other serious health conditions, and their loved ones, need to be especially careful. Anyone with high blood pressure, heart disease, or cancer in the lungs (whether lung cancer or cancer that has spread to the lungs) is especially at risk if they develop COVID-19. For other types of cancer, treatments such as chemotherapy, targeted therapies, immunotherapy, and radiation, can weaken the immune system and possibly cause lung problems. People who have weakened immune systems or lung problems are more likely to have serious symptoms if they become infected with this virus.

Blood cancers such as leukemia, lymphoma, and myeloma also attack the immune system and therefore reduce the patients' natural defenses and make them susceptible to infections. People who have weakened immune systems or lung problems are more likely to have serious symptoms if they become infected with this virus. Anyone with cancer in the lungs (whether lung cancer or cancer that has spread to the lungs) is especially at risk if they develop COVID-19.

If you had scheduled medical appointments, surgery, screening, or other procedures that were considered not urgent or not immediately life-threatening, those were probably postponed.

This is for everyone's protection. Many hospital staff, including doctors, nurses, receptionists, and cleaning staff, have been exposed to the virus and don't know whether they can infect others. You don't want to be exposed to the coronavirus when you go in for surgery or testing procedures for other medical conditions. And, you don't want your medical center to be less able to fight the coronavirus at a time when it is spreading throughout your community. However, if non-urgent medical appointments are being rescheduled again in your community, you and your doctor should decide whether or not to try to get an appointment soon, or whether to delay those medical visits or procedures for a few more weeks.

The coronavirus is spreading in all 50 states, in urban, suburban, and rural areas, so it is important to listen to health experts (and governors or mayors) who tell you to stay home, limit contact with others, and keep a distance of 6 feet away when you or your family members or caregivers go grocery shopping or other essential activities. Unfortunately, some governors, mayors, and state legislators are reopening businesses for economic and political reasons, despite the health risks to patients. Even if you are staying at home as much as possible, the fact that others in your community are going to restaurants, stores, and hair salons will put you at greater risk when you make essential visits to the supermarket or to the doctor, because you may come into contact with people who are infected because aren't being as careful as you are.

## What is Coronavirus?

Coronaviruses are a large group of viruses that can cause respiratory illness. The new (novel) coronavirus is called SARS-CoV-2 and the illness it causes is called coronavirus disease 2019, which is why it's abbreviated as COVID-19. Since it is new, nobody has immunity from it.

## How does COVID-19 spread between people?

The virus usually spreads through close contact with other people, especially through invisible or very tiny droplets when a person coughs or sneezes – or even when they breathe or talk normally. These droplets can travel through the air and can be inhaled or get into the noses, mouths, or eyes of people nearby.

The virus is thought to be most contagious just before or after a person develops symptoms, but it is possible to catch the virus from infected people who have no symptoms at all.

In addition, these droplets (as well as fecal matter containing the virus) can end up on surfaces where it can survive for hours or even days. When you touch these surfaces and then touch your face, you can be exposed to the virus. That's why it's important to wash your hands regularly. If you don't have antiseptic wipes, you can wipe down surfaces in your bathroom, kitchen, and other rooms with bleach or rubbing alcohol to help prevent exposure.

What about food or food packaging? The risk of catching the virus from packaging is very low, but since the virus can survive for up to 24 hours on cardboard and up to 3 days on

plastic and stainless steel, it's a good idea to wash your hands for at least 20 seconds after handling mail, takeout containers, and packaging from groceries. You can also disinfect food packages using a cleaning product that kills viruses, but don't use disinfectants on food.

## What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

Symptoms tend to start between 2 and 14 days after coming into contact with the virus. Although some people have compared the symptoms to a cold or flu, there are some differences. The CDC says that people with these symptoms or combinations of symptoms may have COVID-19:

- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing

*Or at least two of these symptoms:*

- Fever
- Chills
- Repeated shaking with chills
- Muscle pain
- Headache
- Sore throat
- New loss of taste or smell

*Those are the most common symptoms. However, children or adults can have other symptoms as well, including heart problems and “covid toes” that look like a minor case of frostbite. Most people who are infected with this coronavirus have mild symptoms and can recover at home in about 2 weeks. However, symptoms can become severe. These are the ones that require immediate medical attention:*

- difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- persistent chest pain or pressure
- confusion or inability to awaken
- blueish color in the lips or face

People who are older than 60, people with high blood pressure, and people who have existing serious health conditions, such as heart disease, lung disease, and diabetes, are more likely to develop severe illness and complications from COVID-19. This includes people who are receiving cancer treatments that can weaken the immune system. The most serious complications include pneumonia, stroke, blood clots, organ failure, and death.

## How can I protect myself and others?

The best way for anyone to protect themselves is to avoid being exposed to the virus. There are no proven cures or vaccines, so don't be fooled by false claims (especially those made by telemarketers). The one medication that has been proven to help very ill patients by reducing the number of days of hospitalization is remdesivir, which is not widely available and has not been proven to save lives. Despite the hopes of the White House, hydroxychloroquine with or without azithromycin is not recommended because it has been found to increase heart problems and has not been shown to prevent or treat COVID-19.

“Social distancing” or “physical distancing” refers to staying away from other people because it is impossible to know who has the virus. The safest people in your life are the ones you are living with who are not exposed to others who might have

the virus (in other words, they are not going to work or spending time close to other people). Staying at home and not seeing your friends and loved ones is not fun, but it is essential for your own safety and for everyone else's. If everyone does that now, the spread of this virus will be reduced sooner, and some of these restrictions will no longer be necessary in a few weeks.

- stay at home or go outside in your yard or neighborhood where you can keep at least 6 feet away from others
- avoid public spaces where there are other people, especially indoors
- avoid public transportation and unnecessary travel
- avoid all social gatherings that are indoors or where people are close together
- work from home
- stay at least 6 feet away from people when out in public (indoors or outdoors)
- avoid physical contact in social situations, such as shaking hands, hugging or kissing

AND

- wash your hands using soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after being out in public
- use alcohol-based hand sanitizer when soap and water aren't available (or wash your hands as soon as you get home)
- avoid touching your face when your hands aren't clean or you are out in public
- avoid contact with people you don't know very well

- clean and disinfect surfaces you touch daily, including things you might not think of like doorknobs, light switches, faucet handles, and phones. Make sure you use a cleaning agent that is effective for killing viruses.

**What about a face mask?** Since we don't know who has the virus and who doesn't, masks provide some additional protection when you are out in public or with people you don't live with. But you should NOT be out in public or with people you don't live with except when absolutely essential. Even though some states are encouraging businesses to reopen, that doesn't mean it is safe for you to go to them. Especially avoid those that require closeness to others or whose workers are close to many other people, such as a tattoo parlor, hair or nail salon, restaurant, or movie theater. If you must go to a store, try to go to one that makes appointments with customers or limits the number of customers, and spend less than one hour indoors to reduce exposure to any coronavirus that is in the air.

If you have a weakened immune system or other serious health problems, here are extra steps to protect yourself:

- Make a plan with your doctor to monitor for symptoms
- Avoid friends and family except those you live with or depend on for essentials. Otherwise, rely on your phone to maintain contact.
- Have a plan with your loved ones or caregiver if you or they get sick
- Have the medications you rely on and order any you need in advance (to be delivered, if possible)

- Ask a friend or family member to shop for groceries for you
- Wash your hands (20 seconds with soap and water) even more often if you are exposed to others

### What should I do if I develop symptoms?

If you develop more than one of the symptoms listed above, call your doctor. If you have severe symptoms, such as difficulty breathing, persistent chest pain or pressure, confusion or inability to awaken, or blueish color in the lips or face, you need to call 911. Tell the 911 operator that you think you have COVID-19 so the responders can take the necessary precautions to protect themselves.

People who experience mild symptoms can usually stay home and will recover in about 2 weeks. But, if you are receiving treatment for cancer, be sure to tell your doctor. Do not just show up at the doctor's office with symptoms: Call them first so you have to tell them about your symptoms and they can help decide what to do. If you do become sick, you can take the following steps to protect others:

- Stay home, unless you need essential medical care
- Wear a facemask when you are near others. (People caring for you should also wear a facemask).
- Stay away from others in your home as much as possible

- Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze, properly dispose of tissues, and wash your hands
- Monitor your symptoms and temperature

If you were not tested for COVID-19, you should follow those steps until at least one or two weeks have passed since you first noticed symptoms or your fever goes away for 3 full days without fever-reducing medicine. If you have been diagnosed with COVID-19 based on test results, you should follow these steps until you have 2 negative test results taken 24-hours apart, your fever goes away without fever-reducing medicine, and your symptoms improve.

### **What if my cancer treatment is delayed?**

When a person is diagnosed with cancer, they are likely to want treatment as soon as possible. Treatment or testing may seem more urgent than it really is, especially with cancers that often grow slowly, such as prostate cancer or breast cancer. And, if you don't have COVID-19, you don't want to be exposed to it during cancer surgery, testing, or follow-up appointments. Talk to your doctor about what is the best strategy to get the treatment you need when it is safe to do so.

### **Questions?**

We are here to help by answering your questions. We do not provide medical care. If you have questions contact [info@stopcancerfund.org](mailto:info@stopcancerfund.org) and we'll get back to you as soon as possible.