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Coronavirus: What parents should know and do

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Editor's note: Many of our readers have asked questions about coronavirus. We have answered some of these [in this post](#).

As a parent, you can't help but worry about the safety of your children. So it's natural that as stories about the novel coronavirus that started in China flood the news, parents worry about whether their children could be at risk.



We are still learning about this new virus; there is much we do not know yet about how it spreads, how serious it can be, or how to treat it. The fact that so much is unknown is a big part of what makes it frightening. But there are things we do know — about this virus and other similar viruses — that can help us keep our children safe and well.

All of the advice below assumes that you and your family have not recently traveled to an area where there are known cases of coronavirus, or had some other possible exposure. If that is the case, you should call your doctor immediately for advice.

As of this writing, there are relatively few cases in the United States, and many measures are being taken to limit the spread of the virus. It's important to stay informed and listen to the advice of public health officials in your area — and not panic if your child or someone else in your family or community gets a cough and fever. It's far more likely to be a cold, or influenza (flu), than coronavirus.

In fact, influenza infects millions of people every year and kills thousands. Every year, doctors and public health officials talk about ways you can keep you and your loved ones from catching the flu. Those precautions can also help keep you safe from coronavirus, as it seems that the two illnesses spread in similar ways.

- Make sure everyone washes their hands! Using soap and water and washing for 20 seconds (about as long as it takes you to sing the alphabet song) does the trick. If you don't have a sink handy, hand sanitizer will do — make sure you spread it well, getting it all over the hands including between the fingers. Wash before meals and snacks, after being in public places, and after being around anyone who is or might be sick.
- Encourage healthy habits, like eating a healthy diet, exercising, and getting enough sleep. This helps keep your child's immune system strong.
- Make sure your child has received the flu vaccine. The flu is far more common — and can be very dangerous too.
- Teach children not to touch their mouths, eyes, or noses with their hands unless they have just washed them. This is easier said than done, I admit. Make a game out of it — have them itch with their knees instead. Carry tissues for wiping mouths and noses, and throw out used tissues promptly.
- Teach children to be careful about the surfaces they touch when you are out in public. Little hands seem to instinctively reach for everything around them, so you'll need to be creative. Bring things for them to hold instead, or hold hands with them. Have them wear gloves (in cool climates in the winter you'd likely do that anyway — have extras so you can wash the worn ones when you get home). It's not a bad idea to carry some wipes with you to wipe down seats, tables, and other such things in public areas before you use them.

Does avoiding sick people mean staying home?

In addition to the steps above:

- Stay away from sick people to the extent that this is possible. Unless there is a specific public health advisory in your area or an area you are traveling to, this does not mean holing up in your house, skipping school or daycare, and declining every birthday party invitation. Ultimately, it's impossible to stay away from anyone who has any germs that might be spread; as is true of many viruses, it may be that people with coronavirus are contagious before they realize that they are sick. Just be aware of symptoms of people around you, such as coughing or sneezing. Keep space between you and others in public spaces (again, to the extent possible).
- If you are hosting people at your house, you have the right (responsibility, actually) to ask people not to come if they are sick. Keep hand sanitizer by the door of your house and ask guests to use it when they arrive.
- If anyone in your family gets a fever and cough, they should stay home. Chances are it's *not* coronavirus, but whatever it is, it's likely contagious. Not only is staying home and resting the best way to get better, but also you don't want to panic others by having your child cough in their child's face.

Advice if your child has a fever and cough

If your child gets a fever and cough, this is what you should do:

- Call your doctor's office for advice specific to your child and your community.
- If your doctor does not think your child needs to be checked, you can help them feel better by
 - being sure they stay hydrated. Make sure they are drinking regularly. Popsicles are a good way to get fluids in, and can soothe a sore throat.
 - using acetaminophen or ibuprofen for fever. Check with your doctor's office about the right dose for your child.
 - using a humidifier to help with congestion.
 - limiting the use of over-the-counter cold medicines in children under the age of 6. They don't help much (even with kids over 6), and can have side effects. In children over a year, honey can soothe a cough. Use salt water drops for stuffy noses.
 - making sure they rest. Being glued to a TV or device all day is not a good idea.

Watch for warning signs of problems, and seek medical attention if they occur:

- any trouble breathing (rapid or heavy breathing, sucking in around the neck or ribs, looking pale or bluish)
- severe cough that won't stop
- high fever that won't come down with acetaminophen or ibuprofen
- unusual sleepiness
- irritability or pain that you cannot soothe
- refusal to take fluids, or any signs of dehydration (dry mouth, no tears when crying, not urinating at least every six hours).

You should also check in with your doctor if your child has an unusual rash, is having a lot of vomiting or diarrhea — or if there is something else that concerns you. I have learned over the years that parents have a very good “spidey-sense” when something is wrong.

Again: try not to panic. There's [a lot of misinformation](#) floating around. Check reliable sources for updates, follow these tips, and call your doctor if you have any questions.

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