



## "Psychology Works" Fact Sheet: Coping with COVID-19

### What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a new coronavirus that is rapidly spreading throughout the world. According to the WHO, it is classified as a pandemic. Most people experience mild symptoms, although the virus is most harmful to seniors and people with pre-existing medical conditions.

### How is COVID-19 transmitted?

Similar to seasonal flu, people can get infected with COVID-19 if they inhale water droplets containing the virus, such as when someone sneezes on them, or by touching a surface contaminated by the virus (e.g., a hand-railing) and then touching their nose or mouth or rubbing their eyes.

### What should you do if you think you have COVID-19?

The following symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure.

- Fever
- Cough
- Shortness of breath.<sup>i</sup>

If you think you have been exposed to COVID-19 and develop a fever and symptoms of respiratory illness, such as cough or difficulty breathing, call your healthcare provider immediately. If you are sick with COVID-19 or suspect you are infected with the virus that causes COVID-19, follow the steps below, as outlined by the Centre for Disease Control (CDC), to help prevent the disease from spreading to people in your home and community.<sup>ii</sup>

- Stay home except to get medical care
- Separate yourself from other people and animals in your home
- Call ahead before visiting your doctor
- Wear a facemask if you are sick
- Cover your coughs and sneezes
- Clean your hands often
- Avoid sharing personal household items
- Clean all "high-touch" surfaces every day
- Monitor your symptoms and seek prompt medical attention if your illness is worsening (e.g., difficulty breathing)





## What is the best way to keep safe?

Currently, there is no vaccine for COVID-19. Human behaviour is key to the spread of COVID-19, and behavioural strategies may help to reduce transmission. The best way of protecting yourself is to wash your hands regularly with soap and water before and after meals and after touching 'public' surfaces (like doorknobs or handles). Keep your hands away from your face and cover your coughs (e.g., coughing into your arm). The recommended way of doing these things may be different than how you are used to doing them. Using evidence-based behaviour change strategies may help you update your daily routines to keep you safer:

**1. Up-skill how you wash your hands:** Washing our hands is often part of our daily routines already, but to be effective in preventing transmission of the virus, **most of us probably need to wash our hands better and for longer:**

- Make sure you have soap or alcohol-based\* hand sanitizer available; if you're worried about dry hands, bring moisturiser with you (\*alcohol content should be 60% or higher)
- Wash your hands for *at least* 20 seconds. Humming a song (e.g. happy birthday) that lasts that long may help with timing. ("If I'm washing my hands, I will hum happy birthday!")
- Put soap on the back and front of your hands, under your nails and between your fingers
- Make it more salient: consider making it more memorable by telling yourself "when washing my hands, I will wash them as if I just cut up a jalapeno and need to take out my contact lenses!"

**2. Am I really touching my face that much? Yes!** To be transmitted, COVID-19 needs access, and that is usually through your nose, mouth or eyes. Over the course of the day, most people touch their face a few dozen times, often without realizing it. Potentially effective behavioural strategies to stop touching your face are:

- Use 'if-then' plans to 'program' that automatic part of your brain to be more aware of when you touch your face to curb this behaviour. For example, "If I find myself resting my hand on my chin, I will remind myself that I want to stop the spread of COVID-19".
- Ask your family/friends/coworkers to monitor and give you feedback on how often you touch your face without realizing it; make a game out of it to track each other, aiming to touch your face less. You might be amazed at how often you touch your face without realizing it.

**3. Replace handshakes and kissing cheeks:** Shaking hands and kissing cheeks are common ways of greeting in Canadian society. Developing alternative ways of friendly connection during the COVID-19 outbreak. Bumping feet, elbows, or bowing could avoid transmission while maintaining our important social connections. While initially a bit awkward, explaining *why* may help to normalize it.

**4. Get the vaccine once it becomes available:** While not yet available (March 9<sup>th</sup> 2020) when a vaccine is made available, it is important to make the time to get vaccinated for yourself, as well as for those who





can't be vaccinated due to medical and other reasons. We can help everyone stay safe if all of us get vaccinated, because we won't spread infection. This is called "herd immunity." When it comes to vaccination, **do it for the herd!**

**5. If you are planning travel soon, please consider the following:**

- Get familiar with Canadian travel advisories as well as those for your travel destination.
- If you are flying, confirm travel policies and restrictions with your airline (this includes ensuring return or alternate flights can be secured should flight restrictions change).
- Ensure you have appropriate health and travel insurance.

## **Psychological reactions to COVID-19: Why are they important?**

Psychological factors play an important role in how people and communities respond to illness and manage its spread.

Some people **under-respond** to the threat of COVID-19. These people think the danger is exaggerated. Under-responders may not practice good hygiene, they don't get vaccinated, and they don't stay home if they're sick; these behaviours help infection to spread. To accurately assess the risks of COVID-19, check out the websites of the World Health Organization (WHO) or the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) or the Public Health Agency of Canada (see below for links to updated resources).

**Under-responding** could spread infection to family and friends.

Some people **over-respond** to the threat of COVID-19. These people become highly anxious about the infection and may go to great lengths to keep themselves safe. They may become xenophobic (i.e., needlessly frightened of foreign people), may needlessly wear protective masks (While wearing a mask may prevent you from spreading your infection to others, masks are not effective in preventing you from catching an infection from someone else), and may hoard supplies of food and other necessities. Over-responding by one person seeds fear in others because fear is contagious. Moreover, if you hoard food, toilet paper, or hand sanitizer that you are not likely to need for example, then other people in your community have less access to them.

## **Should we be calm? What can people do to stay calm?**

1. Listen to the advice of health authorities such as the WHO, CDC and the Public Health Agency of Canada for more local information about if/how COVID-19 is spreading in your area. See resources below.
2. Change your habits around washing hands, touching your face, socializing and coughing - see behavioural strategies above.
3. Some degree of concern or anxiety is reasonable but try to carry on with your everyday life as much as possible without exposing yourself to unnecessary risks. Engage in your usual behaviours that promote





your well-being; just use caution. For example, provided there is no evidence of infection in your community, and you go to the gym or exercise classes, wash your hands before and after using the equipment and opt to shower at home.

4. Keep things in perspective by consulting sources of information that are balanced and evidence-based, such as WHO, CDC, and PHAC website (see links below). Remind yourself that the graphic images on the Internet, or the rumors on social media, may exaggerate the actual threat. Remember, for example, that the images of empty shelves in supermarkets are compelling visuals but are not necessarily common. No one is posting images of full shelves and calm shoppers because those images aren't newsworthy. If you feel anxious when following news media or social media, limit your exposure.

5. Fear is contagious. If you act frightened or engage in panic buying, then others will react with fear as well. You have a responsibility to your loved ones, friends, and the rest of the community to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak in a sensible, reasoned manner. Try to "lead by example".

6. Remind yourself that the current crisis will pass, and life will return to normal.

## Where can I get more information?

- Further advice for behavioural strategies to reduce transmission: <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/03/03/behavioural-strategies-for-reducing-covid-19-transmission-in-the-general-population/>
- Up to date case tracking worldwide and in Canada using Johns Hopkins interactive tracker: <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>
- Guidance that is regularly updated from trusted sources:
  - **World Health Organization:** <https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus>
  - **US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention:** <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/>
  - **Public Health Agency of Canada:** <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html>
- *The Psychology of Pandemics: Preparing for the Next Global Outbreak of Infectious Disease.* By S. Taylor (2019). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- *It's Not All in Your Head: How Worrying About Your Health Could be Making You Sick - and What You Can Do About It.* By G.J.G. Asmundson & S. Taylor (2004). New York: Guilford Press.

## How can I tell whether I should seek professional help for COVID-19-related stress or anxiety?

Look for warning signs such as the following:

- Persistent anxiety, worry, insomnia, or irritability.
- Needlessly avoiding social contacts to the point that you become unnecessarily isolated.





- Persistently checking your body (e.g., taking your temperature many times each day) or persistently seeking reassurance about your health from doctors, friends, family, or the Internet.
- Performing excessive or unnecessary hygiene precautions, such as wearing a facemask at home or repeatedly washing your hands when there is no need to do so.
- Abusing alcohol or drugs, or overeating, as a way of coping with stress.
- Feedback from friends or family that you seem unusually worried or stressed out.

**How can I get help with stress or anxiety?** Psychological treatments can be very effective, sometimes more effective than medication, in helping people recover from anxiety. To find a psychologist, you can consult the psychological association in your province or city. A list of them can be found at <https://cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations>. Your local hospital, community health clinic or primary care provider (e.g. family doctor or nurse practitioner) may also be of assistance.

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: [factsheets@cpa.ca](mailto:factsheets@cpa.ca)

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/index.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/steps-when-sick.html>

