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## Patient education: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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### What is COVID-19?

Coronavirus disease 2019, or "COVID-19," is an infection caused by a specific virus called SARS-CoV2. It first appeared in late 2019 in the city of Wuhan, China. People with COVID-19 can have fever, cough, and trouble breathing. Problems with breathing happen when the infection affects the lungs and causes pneumonia ([figure 1](#)).

Experts are studying this virus and will continue to learn more about it over time.

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### How is COVID-19 spread?

Experts think COVID-19 first spread to people from animals in China that had the virus. But it can also be spread from person to person, similar to the flu.

Most cases of COVID-19 are in China. But it has spread quickly, and there have been cases in many other countries, including the United States. Most of these happened when people got the infection and then traveled to another country. But in some cases, the virus then spreads to other people. So, there are now smaller outbreaks in several different countries.

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## What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

Symptoms usually start a few days after a person is infected with the virus. But in some people it can take even longer for symptoms to appear.

Symptoms can include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Trouble breathing
- Feeling tired
- Muscle aches

Some people have no symptoms, or only have mild symptoms. But in other people, COVID-19 can lead to serious problems like pneumonia, not getting enough oxygen, or even death. This is more common in people who have other health problems.

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## Should I see a doctor or nurse?

If you have a fever with cough or trouble breathing and might have been exposed to COVID-19, call your doctor or nurse. You might have been exposed if you have been around a person who has the virus, or if you recently (in the last 14 days) traveled to any of the areas where lots of people have the virus.

If your symptoms are not severe, it is best to call your doctor, nurse, or clinic before you go in. They can tell you what to do and where to go. If you do need to go to the clinic or hospital, you will need to put on a face mask. The staff might also have you wait some place away from other people.

If you are severely ill and need to go to the clinic or hospital right away, you should still call ahead. This way the staff can care for you while taking steps to protect others.

Your doctor or nurse will do an exam and ask about your symptoms. They will also ask questions about where you live, and whether you have had contact with people who might be sick or with animals.

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## Will I need tests?

Yes. If your doctor or nurse suspects you have COVID-19, they will do tests on samples of fluid taken from inside your nose and mouth. They might also test fluid from your lungs, as well as your urine and

stool (bowel movements). These tests can all show if you have COVID-19 or another infection.

Your doctor might also order a chest X-ray to check your lungs.

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## How is COVID-19 treated?

Many people with COVID-19 have only mild illness and can rest at home until they get better. If you have more severe illness, you might need to stay in the hospital, possibly in the intensive care unit (also called the "ICU"). There is no specific treatment for the infection, but the doctors and nurses in the hospital can monitor and support your breathing and other body functions, and make you as comfortable as possible.

You might need extra oxygen to help you breathe easily. If you are having a very hard time breathing, you might need to be put on a ventilator. This is a machine to help you breathe.

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## Can COVID-19 be prevented?

There are things you can do to reduce your chances of getting COVID-19.

Some experts recommend avoiding travel to certain countries where there are a lot of cases of COVID-19. If you do live or travel in one of these areas, try to stay away from people who have any symptoms of the infection. You can also protect yourself by washing your hands with soap and water often. The table has instructions on how to wash your hands to prevent spreading illness ([table 1](#)).

You can also lower your risk of infection by avoiding animals and markets that sell animal products. Do not eat raw meat, and do not eat food that might have been in contact with animals without washing, peeling, or boiling it first.

If someone in your home has COVID-19, there are things you can do to protect yourself:

- Keep the sick person away from others – The sick person should stay in a separate room and use a separate bathroom if possible.
- Use face masks – The sick person should wear a face mask when they are in the same room as other people. If you are caring for the sick person, you can also protect yourself by wearing a face mask when you are in the room. This is especially important if the sick person cannot wear a mask.
- Be extra careful around body fluids – If you will be in contact with the sick person's blood, mucus, or other body fluids, wear a disposable face mask, gown, and gloves. If any body fluids touch

your skin, wash your hands with soap right away.

- Clean often – It's especially important to clean things that are touched a lot. This includes counters, bedside tables, doorknobs, computers, phones, and bathroom surfaces.
- Wash hands – Wash your hands with soap and water often ([table 1](#)).

There is not yet a vaccine to prevent COVID-19.

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## How can I prepare for a possible COVID-19 outbreak?

It is hard to predict where future outbreaks might happen. The best thing you can do to stay healthy is to wash your hands regularly, avoid close contact with people who are sick, and stay home if you are sick.

If there is an outbreak in your area, schools or businesses might close temporarily. If this happens, or if someone in your family gets sick with COVID-19, you might need to stay at home for a period of time. There are things you can do to prepare for this. For example, you might be able to ask your employer if you can work from home, or take time off, if it becomes necessary. You can also make sure you have a way to get in touch with relatives, neighbors, and others in your area. This way you will be able to receive and share information easily.

If you or others in your family are anxious about COVID-19, keep in mind that most people do not get severely ill or die from it. While it helps to be prepared, and there are things you can do to lower your risk, try not to panic.

As we learn more about this virus, expert recommendations will continue to change. Check with your doctor or public health official to get the most updated information about how to protect yourself.

You can also find more information about COVID-19 at the following websites:

- United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)
- World Health Organization (WHO): [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)

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## More on this topic

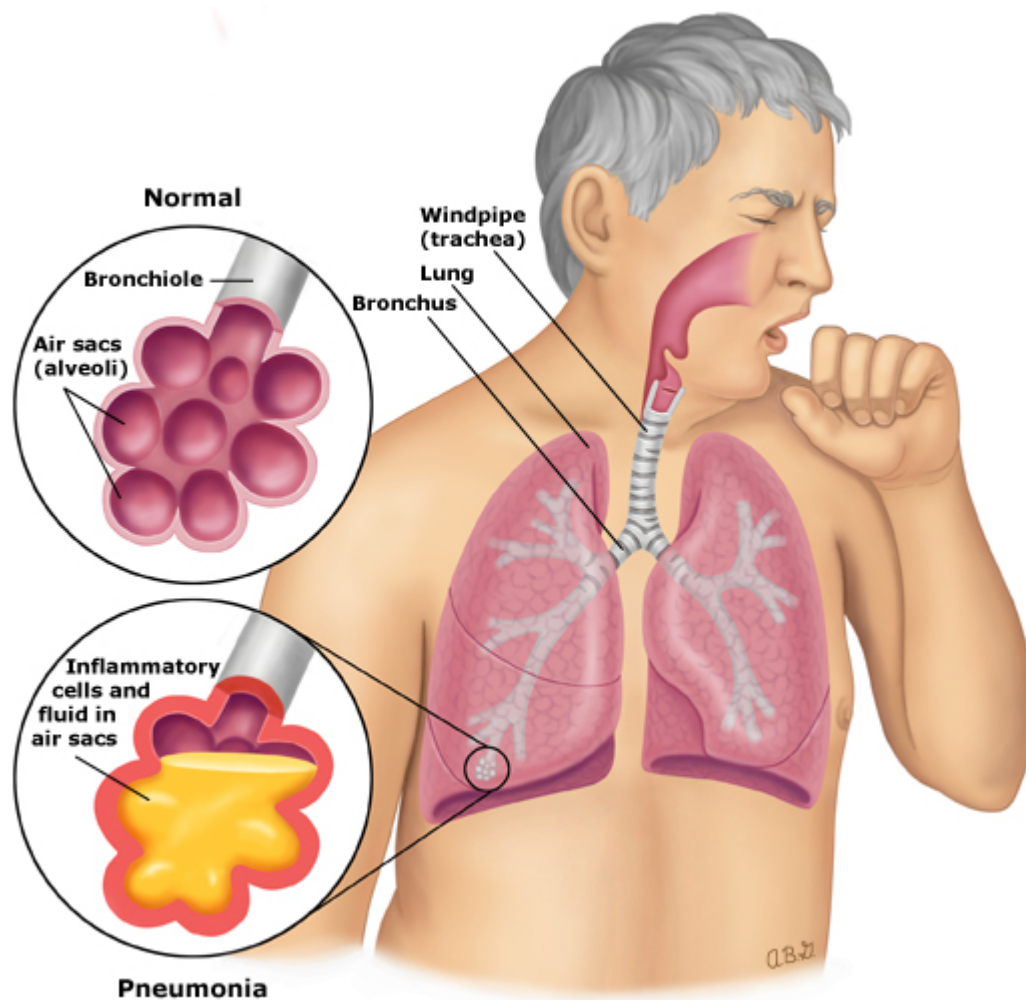
[Patient education: Adult respiratory distress syndrome \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Pneumonia in adults \(The Basics\)](#)

## GRAPHICS

### Pneumonia

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"Alveoli" are air sacs in your lungs that are surrounded by tiny blood vessels called capillaries. The air sacs have thin walls that allow the exchange of gases. When blood flows through the capillaries around the air sacs, it picks up oxygen that you have breathed in and dumps off carbon dioxide that you then breathe out. But if you have pneumonia, your alveoli swell and fill with inflammatory cells and fluid, containing white blood cells, red blood cells, macrophages, fibrin, cell debris, and microorganisms. This makes you cough and makes it hard to breathe.

## Hand washing to prevent spreading illness

■ Wet your hands and put soap on them
■ Rub your hands together for at least 20 seconds. Make sure to clean your wrists, fingernails, and in between your fingers.
■ Rinse your hands
■ Dry your hands with a paper towel that you can throw away

If you are not near a sink, you can use a hand gel to clean your hands. The gels with alcohol in them work the best. But it is better to wash with soap and water if you can.

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## Contributor Disclosures

**Allyson Bloom, MD** Nothing to disclose

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