

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) FAQs
March 20, 2020

Q: What is Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)?

A: A novel coronavirus is a new coronavirus that has not been previously identified. The virus causing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is not the same as the coronaviruses that commonly circulate among humans and cause mild illness, like the common cold. A diagnosis with coronavirus 229E, NL63, OC43, or HKU1 is not the same as a COVID-19 diagnosis. Patients with COVID-19 will be evaluated and cared for differently than patients with common coronavirus diagnosis.

Source: CDC – [Frequently Asked Questions](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html) – <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html>

Q: How do you become infected with COVID-19?

A: The virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person.

- Between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet).
- Through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs.

It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads. Throughout the day wash your hands after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing, or going to the bathroom.

Several agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization, the U.S. Surgeon General, and the Director of the National Institute for Allergies and Infectious Diseases, have all indicated that there is currently no evidence that COVID-19 is being spread through the mail. The opinions of the health experts continues to be that risk to employees is low.

Sources: CDC – [How It Spreads](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/transmission.html) – <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/transmission.html>; [Frequently Asked Questions](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html) – <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html>; World Health Organization – [Q&A on coronaviruses \(COVID-19\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses) – <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>

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Q: Can someone who has had COVID-19 spread the illness to others?

A: The virus that causes COVID-19 is spreading from person-to-person. Someone who is actively sick with COVID-19 can spread the illness to others. That is why CDC recommends that these patients be isolated either in the hospital or at home (depending on how sick they are) until they are better and no longer pose a risk of infecting others.

How long someone is actively sick can vary, so the decision on when to release someone from isolation is made on a case-by-case basis in consultation with doctors, infection prevention and control experts, and/or public health officials and involves considering specifics of each situation including disease severity, illness signs and symptoms, and results of laboratory testing for that patient.

Someone who has been released from isolation is not considered to pose a risk of infection to others, according to the medical experts.

Source: CDC – [Frequently Asked Questions](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html) – <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html>

Q: Can someone who has been quarantined for COVID-19 spread the illness to others?

A: Quarantine means separating a person or group of people who have been exposed to a contagious disease, but who have not developed illness (symptoms) from others who have not been exposed, in order to prevent the possible spread of that disease. As noted above, an individual with COVID-19 is subject to isolation measures instead.

Quarantine is usually established for the incubation period of the communicable disease, which is the span of time during which people have developed illness after exposure. For COVID-19, the period of quarantine is 14 days from the last date of exposure, because 14 days is the longest incubation period seen for similar coronaviruses. Someone who has been released from COVID-19 quarantine is not considered a risk for spreading the virus to others because they have not developed illness during the incubation period.

Source: CDC – [Frequently Asked Questions](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html) – <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html>

Q: Can I become infected with COVID-19 if I work with someone who becomes infected with the virus?

A: While it's possible to contract COVID-19 from working with someone who has the virus, people are thought to be most contagious when they are most symptomatic (the sickest). Some spread might be possible before people show symptoms, and there have been reports of this occurring with this new coronavirus, but this is not thought to be the main way COVID-19 spreads. Following CDC's recommendations about social distancing to the extent feasible and practicing good hygiene can help reduce your risk.

Source: CDC – [How It Spreads](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/transmission.html) – <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/transmission.html>

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Q: Can I become infected from contact with contaminated surfaces or objects?

A: It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads. Following CDC's recommendations about social distancing to the extent feasible and practicing good hygiene can help reduce your risk.

Source: CDC – [How It Spreads](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/transmission.html) – <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/transmission.html>

Q: Can someone spread the virus without being sick?

A: People are thought to be most contagious when they are most symptomatic (the sickest). Some spread might be possible before people show symptoms; there have been reports of this occurring with this new coronavirus, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads.

Source: CDC – [How It Spreads](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/transmission.html) – <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/transmission.html>

Q: What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

A: The standard symptoms are fever, cough, and shortness of breath. People who are mildly ill may be able to isolate and care for themselves at home.

However, if you develop emergency warning signs for COVID-19, get medical attention immediately. Emergency warning signs include:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath;
- Persistent pain or pressure in the chest;
- New confusion or inability to arouse (unconscious or very difficult to wake up); or
- Bluish lips or face.

This list is not all inclusive. Please consult your medical provider for any other symptoms that are severe or concerning.

Source: CDC – [Symptoms](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/index.html) – <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/index.html>

Q: When are you testing us?

A: The Postal Service will not test employees for COVID-19. According to CDC, if you have been exposed to COVID-19 and develop a fever and symptoms, such as cough or difficulty breathing, call your healthcare provider for medical advice. Tell the provider about your symptoms and your exposure. The provider will decide whether you need to be tested, but keep in mind that there is no vaccination or treatment for COVID-19 at this point in time.

Source: CDC – [Testing](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/testing.html) – <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/testing.html>

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Q: I want to go home. I don't feel safe to work here now.

A: Employees who do not feel safe working in the facility may be allowed to take emergency annual leave or leave without pay, to the extent feasible. The Postal Service will follow a liberal leave usage policy for employees.

Q: I am the caregiver of a compromised parent/spouse/child in my home. I want to go home.

/ or / I have a medical condition. I am pregnant. I want to go home.

/ or / I am in a high-risk category based on age. I want to go home.

A: Employees caring for compromised dependents or in high-risk categories, based on medical condition, pregnancy, or age, who feel they should go home due to COVID-19 should bring their concerns to their supervisor or manager. Employees may be eligible to use sick leave for dependent care, other paid sick leave, or another leave under Postal Service policies. The Postal Service will follow a liberal leave usage policy for employees.

Q: What can you tell us about our infected coworkers?

A: Federal privacy laws prevent us from revealing the names or specific information of individuals and any medical conditions.

Q: If I go home because I am sick, how will I be paid?

A: An employee who goes home because he or she is sick will be eligible to take sick leave and/or annual leave, consistent with the provisions contained in ELM Section 513 or the Emergency Paid Sick Leave Act, when effective. In addition, a Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) packet will be generated and sent for any employee who uses leave in conjunction with COVID-19. The Postal Service will follow a liberal sick leave usage policy for employees who are sick and encourages those who are sick to stay home and get well.

Source: USPS HQ COVID Managers Guide

Q: My kids are home from school because of COVID-19 closures, and I need to stay there.

A: Under the temporarily expanded liberal leave policy, employees may use sick leave for dependent care in the event they must care for a child as a result of daycare closures or school (Pre-K through Grade 12) closures. Additionally, telework-eligible employees are permitted under the expanded telework policy to telework even if they have children at home, although productivity must remain at a reasonable level. When the Families First Coronavirus Response Act becomes effective, covered employees will be eligible to use FMLA leave to stay home during such closures. An FMLA packet should be generated for any employee who uses leave in conjunction with COVID-19.

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Source: USPS HQ COVID Managers Guide

Q: Someone in my family was exposed and is on a quarantine. Do I stay home now too? For how long? How do I get paid?

A: As long as you are not experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, you are authorized to remain at work and perform your daily duties. If an employee stays at home to take care of a sick family member who has contracted COVID-19, then an FMLA packet should be generated for the employee in this situation. When the Emergency Paid Sick Leave Act becomes effective, employees may be eligible for leave under that Act depending on the circumstances. The Postal Service is applying a liberal leave policy for annual leave, sick leave, and leave without pay.

Source: USPS HQ COVID Managers Guide

Q: I just got tested. Who will pay for that test? Who will pay for my family to get tested?

A: The Postal Service is not paying for employees or their families to be tested for COVID-19.

Q: How are you cleaning the building?

A: CDC recommends cleaning frequently touched surfaces and commonly shared items at least daily using routine cleaning agents (e.g., detergents, spray cleaners, and sanitizers).

Postal Service maintenance management protocols detail cleaning requirements, infection-control strategies, and recommended products, as well as the surfaces and areas that require cleaning and the frequencies for these tasks. In addition, when needed, private contract cleaning companies are available to assist cleaning our facilities, particularly when an employee is confirmed to have COVID-19 and spends time working in the building.

Source: Feb. 3, 2020 MMO SAFETY BULLETIN

Q: What does the cleaning include?

A: The cleaning is being completed in conformance with the guidance issued by CDC regarding methods to reduce the spread of viruses that cause respiratory illness, such as influenza (flu) and coronavirus and the Postal Service MMO. This guidance includes information on cleaning requirements, infection-control strategies, and recommended products. CDC recommends the use of routine cleaning agents (e.g., detergents, spray cleaners, and sanitizers) used in normal cleaning processes.

Source: Feb. 3, 2020 MMO SAFETY BULLETIN

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Q: I need gloves, sanitizer, and/or disinfectant wipes to work. Will the Postal Service provide them?

A: The Postal Service makes these items available to employees who request them. While we have had some problems in some locations with supply, the Postal Service is constantly monitoring the situation and aggressively restocking these materials.

Source: USPS HQ COVID Managers Guide

Q: I want a mask.

A: The Postal Service will provide surgical masks to any employee who requests one, and the masks can be ordered through eBay Plus. However, the CDC does not recommend that healthy individuals wear masks to protect themselves from COVID-19.

Sources: USPS HQ COVID Managers Guide; CDC – [Frequently Asked Questions](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html) – <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html>

Q: If this building closes for a while, do we have another place to work? Who will tell me where to go and when?

A: Most of us are now familiar with using the USPS National Emergency Hotline number for information about facility closings, changes in reporting times, and other workplace information throughout a storm or other weather-related event. As necessary, we will use this same number: 1-888-363-7462, or 1-888- E M E R G N C, to share information about alternate work sites for you if we activate a continuity of operations plan for this building.

Source: [National Emergency Preparedness](https://blue.usps.gov/nationalpreparedness/) – <https://blue.usps.gov/nationalpreparedness/>

Q: How long does the virus live on a hard surface? A metal surface? A keyboard?

A: It is not clear how long the virus that causes COVID-19 survives on surfaces, but it seems to behave like other coronaviruses. Studies suggest that coronaviruses (including preliminary information on COVID-19) may persist on surfaces for a few hours or up to several days. This may vary under different conditions (e.g., type of surface, temperature or humidity of the environment). It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads.

Sources: World Health Organization – [Q&A on coronaviruses \(COVID-19\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses) – <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>; CDC – [How It Spreads](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/transmission.html) – <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/transmission.html>

Q: Is the mail safe?

A: Both the CDC and the World Health Organization have indicated that there is currently no evidence that COVID-19 is spreading through the mail.

The World Health Organization says specifically that the likelihood of an infected

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person contaminating commercial goods is low and the risk of catching the virus that causes COVID-19 from a package that has been moved, travelled, and exposed to different conditions and temperatures is also low.

In addition, the U.S. Surgeon General has commented that there is no evidence at this time that the virus can be spread through the mail.

Sources: CDC – [Frequently Asked Questions](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html) – <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html>; World Health Organization – [Q&A on coronaviruses \(COVID-19\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses) – <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>

ADDITIONAL EMPLOYEE RESOURCES

Q: Where can I get more information?

A: The Postal Service has launched special Blue and LiteBlue websites with resources about COVID-19. Both pages feature videos and postal news articles on the topic, as well as workplace posters and information sheets from CDC. The Blue page also has stand-up talks for reference.

The Blue page is available on any computer connected to the USPS network by clicking on the COVID-19 box on the home page. The LiteBlue page can be viewed on any computer, mobile phone, tablet, or other smart device with an internet connection, at this address: <https://liteblue.usps.gov/lite-blue/covid19/welcome.htm>.

Q: The whole situation is very stressful. What else can I do?

A: Counseling and other services are available through the Postal Service's Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The aim is to help employees and their families overcome any life challenges that can affect health, family relationships, or job performance. EAP is voluntary, confidential, and free.

Services include: face-to-face counseling, telephone counseling, video therapy, online therapy — and even text therapy.

You can speak with a counselor 24/7 by calling 800-327-4968. The TTY number is 877-492-7341. The [EAP4YOU.com](https://www.eap4you.com) website has more information.

DEFINITIONS

Q: What's the difference between an epidemic and a pandemic?

A: A **pandemic** is a global outbreak of a new virus that is very different from current and recently circulating human seasonal viruses. Pandemics happen when new (novel) viruses emerge that are able to infect people easily **and** spread from person to person in an efficient and sustained way.

Source: CDC – [Pandemic Basics](https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/basics/index.html) – <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/basics/index.html>

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Epidemic refers to an increase, often sudden, in the number of cases of a disease above what is normally expected in that population in that area.

Source: CDC – [Principles of Epidemiology in Public Health Practice, Third Edition](https://www.cdc.gov/csels/dsepd/ss1978/)
[An Introduction to Applied Epidemiology and Biostatistics](https://www.cdc.gov/csels/dsepd/ss1978/) –
<https://www.cdc.gov/csels/dsepd/ss1978/>

Q: Why is the Postal Service remaining open when the President declared a national state of emergency?

A: A governmental state of emergency is not a health-related declaration. A state of emergency is typically declared when a government official feels that action needs to be taken urgently, and authorization is needed for more resources to speed up assistance to communities.

That usually means that emergency funding is released to help handle the situation, whether it be supplies, shelters during hurricanes and other weather events, or calling out the National Guard to help with disaster clean-ups.

Source: Association of State and Territorial Health Officials – [Emergency Declarations and Authorities Fact Sheet](https://www.astho.org/Programs/Preparedness/Public-Health-Emergency-Law/Emergency-Authority-and-Immunity-Toolkit/Emergency-Declarations-and-Authorities-Fact-Sheet/) – <https://www.astho.org/Programs/Preparedness/Public-Health-Emergency-Law/Emergency-Authority-and-Immunity-Toolkit/Emergency-Declarations-and-Authorities-Fact-Sheet/>

The Postal Service is keeping lines of communication open with CDC, and with state and local Public Health Departments, to follow the most up-to-date guidance from those health organizations.

Source: U.S. Postal Service Pandemic Influenza Plan

In addition, the Postal Service performs an essential public service and is a part of the Federal Government's critical infrastructure.

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