

2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) ^[1]

Hey Alice!

I've been hearing a lot on the news about the new virus [novel coronavirus, COVID-19] and I'm seeing students on campus wearing masks. The news seems to have conflicting information and I'm not sure what to do. Should I be worried? Do I need to wear a mask too? Thank you.

Answer

Dear Reader,

For those looking for a little background, the virus to which you're referring is known as SARS-CoV-2, and the disease it causes is called the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). It's primarily transmitted from person-to-person contact, and the outbreak has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. At this time, there is widespread community transmission in the United States, with hundreds of thousands of confirmed cases. Due to this, the majority of states have implemented stay-at-home orders and are recommending that everybody practice physical distancing to reduce the spread of the disease. If you're concerned that you, or anyone you know, might be displaying symptoms associated with the virus (more on those in a bit), speaking with a health care provider is recommended. To answer your question about masks, at this time, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is recommending that people wear face coverings when they're experiencing symptoms or when they're going out in public areas in which it may be hard to physically distance (such as the grocery store).

To cover some of the basics, coronaviruses are a family of illnesses, which also include colds. The virus may cause mild to moderate upper-respiratory tract infections and even severe forms of pneumonia ^[2] in some cases. The first reported case of this particular strain of virus was from a seafood and live-animal market in Wuhan, China in late-December 2019, indicating an animal-to-person transmission (a typical characteristic of coronaviruses). Over time, there were confirmed cases among patients not exposed to the animal markets, which alerted medical professionals that the virus could be spread from person-to-person. This has now been indicated to be the main form of disease spread. Similar to other coronaviruses, COVID-19 is most commonly spread through respiratory droplets and close contact with those who are infected. It's also

possible that spread is possible while people are presymptomatic, meaning that they may be spreading the virus to others before they show symptoms. Additionally, some people may be asymptomatic, which means that they're carrying the virus and are able to spread it to others, but never develop symptoms themselves. It's also possible that transmission could occur by touching infected surfaces and then touching your nose, mouth, or eyes, as well as through aerosolized particles (tiny droplets that remain in the air). However, these methods aren't believed to be the most common way for COVID-19 to spread. It spreads most through close contact with others, which is why maintaining physical distance is so key.

Health authorities across the globe, including the CDC and World Health Organization [3], are working around the clock to keep tabs on the progression of COVID-19. It's worth noting that the emergence of this virus coincides with cold and flu season, and its peak is predicted to occur during allergy season, which may make identifying symptoms a bit more challenging. Because this is rapidly changing, the risk associated with contracting the disease may evolve over time.

That being said, there are some symptoms to look out for:

- Shortness of breath
- Fever
- Cough

Currently, the incubation period, which is the amount of time between exposure to a disease and the development of symptoms, is believed to be anywhere between 2 to 14 days. If you're experiencing any of these symptoms, it's critical to be in touch with your health care provider. While most people will experience mild cases and can recover at home, some will experience more serious cases that require hospitalization. Some people, such as those with underlying medical conditions and those who are older, may be at an increased risk for experiencing a more severe case of the disease. It's key to seek care if experiencing any symptoms that the CDC has deemed emergency warning signs, such as trouble breathing, bluish lips, persistent chest pain, and new confusion. In terms of treatment, there are no drugs available specific to treating COVID-19. Most treatment focuses on relieving symptoms, rather than treating the condition itself. However, there are currently a number of trials happening with drugs approved for other conditions and investigational drugs to see if they can help treat COVID-19.

In order to limit with the spread of coronavirus, there are some preventative measures that may help. Right now, the most prominent recommendation is to participate in physical distancing (also commonly called social distancing). This means staying at home as much as possible, keeping six feet (two meters) between yourself and others when you need to go out, and avoiding places with large groups of people. Many governments have put orders in place to close locations and events with large gatherings, and other essential businesses have limited the number of people who may occupy their space. Further, this also means not socializing with others, even while in small groups, in order to reduce the risk of exposure. In addition to physical distancing, there are

some additional measures that can be taken to reduce the spread of COVID-19:

- Wash your hands [4] often with soap and water.
- Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water aren't available.
- Avoid touching your face.
- Clean or disinfect commonly used objects regularly.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue, or if one isn't available, cough or sneeze into the inside of your elbow.

List adapted from the CDC [5].

Further, it's also wise to keep abreast of all travel restrictions and requirements as implemented by federal and local governments. If you have any international travel planned, you may want to adjust any plans that aren't essential. Changes in travel restrictions while you're abroad may make returning home more challenging if you're in an affected region.

You mentioned that you've seen students wearing masks around campus. Many folks choose to use these masks as a preventive measure. The guidance on masks has evolved as researchers learn more about COVID-19, but at this time, the CDC recommends that people wear face coverings outside of the house when in public places. Using a face covering isn't a substitute for physical distancing, and they encourage everyone to maintain physical distance as much as possible. Additionally, they also recommend that these face coverings be made from cloth materials that people may have at home. There are still no formal recommendations for the general public to wear medical equipment such as surgical masks or N95 masks, as there is currently a shortage. It's critical that this equipment get to health care providers who need it in order to protect them while they support their communities. If you're unsure of how to make your own face covering, the CDC has some general information and instructions [6] on how to make a face cover. It's key that the face covering be snug on the face, allow for easy breathing, secured with ties, covers the nose and chin, can be easily cleaned, and has multiple layers of material. However, face coverings aren't recommended for those under the age of two, people who have trouble breathing, or those who wouldn't be able to remove the face covering on their own. Further, face coverings are still recommended for those who are experiencing symptoms and for those caring for them.

If you want to keep on top of what's happening with the outbreak, consider checking the CDC website [7] for updates. It's great that you're seeking out answers, particularly when you're seeing conflicting information. Hope this helps!

Alice!

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[3] <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

[4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/how-to-wash-hands>

[5] <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>

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