2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) [1]

Hey Alice!

I've been hearing a lot on the news about the new virus from China 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 from China, known as the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) originated in Wuhan, China. It’s primarily transmitted from person-to-person contact, and according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [2], it has become a major public health threat to the United States. However, most people have little chance of coming into contact with the disease at this time. 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 your question about masks — the current recommendation is that they’re not necessary for those not experiencing symptoms, and the CDC and WHO aren’t recommending them as a method to stop the spread of COVID-19.

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 [3] in some cases. This particular strain of virus was first found in 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 transmission could occur by touching infected surfaces and then touching your nose, mouth, or eyes. However, it’s not believed to be the most common way for COVID-19 to spread. Some spread may be possible before people show symptoms, but it’s most common to spread when they’re sickest and actively experiencing symptoms.
Health authorities across the globe, including the CDC and World Health Organization [4] 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, so it’s more likely that you’ve come in contact with someone who has the common cold or the flu. That being said, the CDC does indicate that community spread is being detected in more places. Because this is rapidly changing, the risk associated with contracting the disease may evolve over time.

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

- Shortness of breath
- Fever
- Cough

Currently, the incubation period is believed to be anywhere between 2 to 14 days. If you’re experiencing any of these symptoms, it’s critical to be assessed by a health care provider. Before seeking care, call in advance to let them know you’re coming. At this time, there is no specific treatment or vaccine for COVID-19, only treatment to relieve symptoms.

In order to limit your contact with coronavirus, there are some preventative measures that might help reduce the odds. These measures also help to reduce the spread of colds and the flu:

- Wash your hands [5] 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.
- Stay home when you’re sick.
- Avoid others who are or may be sick.

*List adapted from the CDC [2].*

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. However, the research on a mask’s ability to prevent infectious disease is mixed and hasn’t shown that it’s particularly beneficial. For example, in a study at the University of Michigan, they found that wearing masks and using alcohol-based hand sanitizers could help reduce the spread of influenza by 50 percent. On the other hand, masks are intended to keep out larger liquid droplets, so it wouldn’t be as effective at filtering out fine particles that may contain the virus. If you do choose to wear a mask, it’s good to wear them consistently and correctly (keeping the mouth and nose covered), knowing that it’s mostly there to help with face touching and keeping large droplets of bodily fluid away. There are no formal recommendations to wear masks, and in fact, public health experts and medical professionals are urging the general public who aren’t experiencing symptoms to not wear them. The increase in people wearing masks can create shortages in supplies for health care professionals who are
treating those with COVID-19. This puts them and the communities they serve at higher risk of contracting it.

If you want to keep on top of what’s happening with the outbreak, consider checking the CDC website [6] 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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