

# COVID-19 BASICS

## What is SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19?

SARS-CoV-2 is a coronavirus that causes COVID-19, a respiratory illness. The virus is currently spreading from person-to-person. Health experts are concerned because this virus causes severe illness and pneumonia, and even death, in some people.

## How does COVID-19 spread?

Currently COVID-19 is thought to spread mainly through close contact from person to person, including between people who are physically near each other (within about 6 feet). People who are infected but do not show symptoms can also spread the virus to others.

## How severe is COVID-19?

Most coronavirus illnesses are mild with fever and cough. The vast majority of people with this coronavirus infection do not require hospital care. A much smaller percentage of people get severely ill with lung and breathing problems like pneumonia. Elderly people and people with underlying medical conditions are at highest risk for severe disease.

## What are the symptoms?

People with COVID-19 have had a wide range of symptoms reported – ranging from mild symptoms to severe illness. Symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure to the virus. People with these symptoms or combinations of symptoms may have COVID-19: Fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, diarrhea. This list is not all inclusive. Please consult your medical provider for any other symptoms that are severe or concerning to you.

## When do I seek medical evaluation and advice?

If you have COVID-19-like symptoms, contact your doctor first. Do not go to the emergency room.

Emergency rooms need to be able to serve those with the most critical needs. If you have difficulty breathing, it doesn't mean you have this coronavirus, but you should call 911.

If you're over 60 and you have underlying conditions like diabetes, heart disease, and lung disease, come up with a plan with your doctor to identify your health risks for coronavirus and how to manage symptoms. Contact your doctor right away if you do have symptoms.

If you have symptoms and you were exposed to someone confirmed to have the virus, call your health care provider.

## What should I do if COVID-19 variants are spreading in my area?

Viruses constantly change through mutation, and new variants of a virus are expected to occur.

Sometimes new variants emerge and disappear. Other times, new variants persist. Multiple variants of the virus that causes COVID-19 have been documented in the United States and globally during this pandemic. To date, studies show the current authorized vaccines are effective against identified variants in helping to prevent severe illness and death.

## How can I protect myself from COVID-19?

It's important that everyone take steps to reduce the spread of coronaviruses, especially to protect those who are more vulnerable.

- Get a COVID-19 vaccine.
- Wear a mask that covers your nose and mouth to help protect yourself and others.
- Stay 6 feet apart from others.
- Avoid crowds and poorly ventilated indoor spaces.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water. Use hand sanitizer if soap and water aren't available.

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## Should I get a COVID-19 vaccine?

Research indicates that COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective in preventing severe illness and death. Everyone 12 years of age and older is now eligible to get a free COVID-19 vaccination. If you have questions about COVID-19 vaccines, visit the CDC for answers to frequently-asked questions and the Commonwealth of PA to find a vaccine near you. You can also speak with your healthcare provider to get answers specific to your health.

## How is COVID-19 treated?

There are no medications specifically approved for COVID-19 for use outside of hospital settings.

Most people with mild COVID-19 illness will recover on their own by drinking plenty of fluids, resting, and taking pain and fever medications. However, some cases develop pneumonia and require medical care or hospitalization, and there are current studies on different treatment options for individuals requiring that level of care.

## Can you get re-infected with COVID-19?

Cases of reinfection with COVID-19 have been reported. Current studies are ongoing to determine how likely reinfection is, how often it occurs, how soon after the first infection reinfection can take place, how severe are cases of reinfection, who might be at higher risk for reinfection, what reinfection means for a person's immunity, and if a person is able to spread COVID-19 to other people when reinfected.

## Where can I get tested?

Your physician's office is a great place to seek a test. Testing is typically conducted by taking a swab from the nose. Visit Allegheny County to find information on COVID-19 testing opportunities available to you.

