

March 3, 2020

Kaiser Permanente and COVID-19

As a member of the Kaiser Permanente family, your health and safety are critically important. So, we want to be sure you have the latest information about COVID-19 — the disease caused by the novel coronavirus — and the precautions you can take.

Our leaders and infectious disease experts are working closely with public health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention officials to ensure a coordinated response to this situation. Kaiser Permanente has confronted highly infectious diseases for years, and we are confident we can safely treat patients who have been infected with this virus while protecting other patients, members, visitors, and employees.

Kaiser Permanente is a recognized leader in the prevention and treatment of influenza — and the same practices that stop the flu's spread are recommended for this virus. We encourage you to adopt these safe practices. Below you will find answers to the most common questions about what you can do to help protect yourself and others.

We are closely monitoring the progress of this illness and will adjust our practices according to CDC recommendations.

Q&A: David Witt, MD, on coronavirus preparedness at Kaiser Permanente.

The novel coronavirus, which causes the disease known as COVID-19, was first identified in late 2019 and has rapidly spread through China, infecting thousands of people across the country, as well as others around the world.

Though fatalities in China and other countries have been reported, it is important that we do not panic as the immediate health risk for the general American public remains low.

Kaiser Permanente has been working on confronting highly infectious diseases for years, and we are confident we can safely treat patients who have been infected with this virus, while protecting other patients, members, and employees.

We asked David Witt, MD, national infectious disease leader at Kaiser Permanente, to discuss the current coronavirus situation and how Kaiser Permanente has been preparing to address the outbreak of this disease.

What is the coronavirus?

The 2019 novel coronavirus, which causes the disease now designated "COVID-19" by the World Health Organization, is a new virus that causes respiratory illness and can be spread through person-to-person contact.

The virus was first identified during an investigation into an outbreak in Wuhan, China, and was declared a global health emergency by WHO on January 30, 2020 — the same day the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention confirmed the first human-to-human transmission in the United States.

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Is the coronavirus life-threatening?

Though this new coronavirus can occasionally be more serious than the flu, especially for those with existing chronic conditions or weakened immune systems, it is not generally a serious threat for most healthy adults.

Many experts would agree that influenza currently poses a much greater risk than the new coronavirus, as it kills about 35,000 Americans each year.

The virus that causes COVID-19 is just one in a family of coronaviruses. Many people have likely already been infected by a different type of coronavirus before, as it is one of the many viruses that can lead to “the common cold.”

How is the coronavirus spread?

Current understanding about how the virus that causes COVID-19 spreads is largely based on what is known about similar coronaviruses. 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). Respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. People are thought to be most contagious when they are most symptomatic (the sickest). So far, limited person-to-person spread among close contacts has been detected with this virus in the United States.

It may also be possible that people 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.

What are the symptoms of the coronavirus?

Typical symptoms include fever and cough.

How can I help protect myself and others?

It’s still cold and flu season, and the same practices that stop the spread of these common illnesses are recommended:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home if you are sick, except to get medical care.
- Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue away and wash your hands.
- Clean and disinfect objects and surfaces you touch.

Is the coronavirus a threat to U.S.?

The potential public health threat posed by the coronavirus is high, both globally and to the United States. But individual risk is dependent on exposure. For the general American public, who are unlikely to be exposed to this virus at this time, the immediate health risk is considered low, according to the CDC.

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In addition, we have taken steps to ensure that Kaiser Permanente employees and physicians are prepared and equipped to safely care for suspected and confirmed cases.

People in China or those who have traveled to China or other at-risk areas within the last 2 weeks are at the greatest risk for a coronavirus infection.

Is Kaiser Permanente prepared to handle a coronavirus infection at its facilities and hospitals?

We have been working on confronting highly infectious diseases for years and are confident we can safely treat patients who exhibit any symptoms of COVID-19 while protecting other patients, members, and employees.

Still, we understand the importance of having the most up-to-date, accurate information when dealing with any evolving situation. The CDC and Kaiser Permanente National Healthcare Continuity Clinical Workgroup continue to monitor the situation closely and we are prepared to make the proper adjustments to our practices to align with recommendations from the CDC.

Is there a treatment or vaccine for coronavirus available in the United States?

There is currently no vaccine to protect against the 2019 novel coronavirus. But because it is spread the same way as the common cold or flu, washing your hands frequently and avoiding exposure to this virus are the best ways to prevent an infection.

And while there is no specific antiviral treatment, people who have been infected should still seek medical care to help relieve symptoms. There are several trials underway for antiviral medications.

We are proud that the National Institutes of Health selected Kaiser Permanente Washington Health Research Institute as the first to begin clinical testing of a vaccine.

What should I do if I think I've been exposed to the coronavirus?

If you think you may have been exposed, please notify your manager before returning to work and call the advice number on the back of your Kaiser Permanente membership card for instructions. For details on our HR policy on possible employee exposure to COVID-19, please refer to the [Kaiser Permanente Policy Library](#) and [My HR](#).

What should I do if I recently traveled to an at-risk area and am now sick?

If you traveled to an at-risk location and now feel sick with fever or cough, you should first call the advice number on the back of your Kaiser Permanente membership card for instructions. It's important to call before going into a medical facility so that you are directed to the most appropriate care and we can take precautions to protect other employees, members, and patients.

Please notify your manager in accordance with existing sick policies and procedures. If a physician determines that you should stay out of the workplace, notify your manager and follow physician instructions regarding work restrictions and follow-up procedures.

What other precautions should I take?

Front-line health care workers should ask their managers about any specific procedures for the coronavirus at their medical facility.

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At home, consider reviewing your emergency plan to be prepared for any unexpected emergency and consider how you might protect the rest of your family if one of you gets sick.

Kaiser Permanente staff can also help by not spreading rumors or false information about suspected or confirmed cases. We are committed to protected patient privacy.

Recently, we have seen reports that the spread of the coronavirus has created a severe shortage in the supply and inventory of medical and health care products. Has Kaiser Permanente been impacted by this shortage?

The health care industry manages product shortages on a regular basis. At Kaiser Permanente, our large, integrated health care system allows us to move supplies between facilities as needed to continue to serve our patients and communities.

We have strong contingency plans in place to identify and use clinically acceptable alternative products to ensure that patient care is uninterrupted.

Regarding the shortages caused by the coronavirus outbreak, we have been monitoring supplies and distribution across our network.

Where can I get the latest coronavirus information?

For the latest information, visit the [CDC website](#).