

# COVID-19 Prevention Guide

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New Mexico Hematology  
and Oncology Specialists

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## Artesia General Hospital | New Mexico Hematology and Oncology Specialists Guide for Preventing COVID-19

As coronavirus (COVID-19) continues to spread, hospitals big and small all over the world are focusing on the health and safety of their patients and employees. New Mexico Hematology and Oncology Specialists, a division of Artesia Healthcare Professionals, is your partner in providing cancer care. We are here to provide support and guidance through the COVID-19 pandemic as it affects our patients, and our wider community.

Cancer patients currently on treatment, or who have recently completed treatments, are at a slightly higher risk for severe infection if COVID-19 is transmitted. Therefore we want you, your family and friends to carefully follow the recommendations in this guide.

If you're feeling anxious about COVID-19, keep in mind that most people experience only mild symptoms, and are able to recover. There are also preventive actions you can take right now to lower your risk. The goal of this guide is not to create panic or make scary predictions, but to help our patients understand how to protect themselves and others by following five essentials of avoiding an infection.

### What is COVID-19?

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. There are many types of human coronaviruses, including some that commonly cause mild upper-respiratory tract illnesses. COVID-19 is a new disease, caused by a novel (or new) coronavirus that has not previously been seen in humans. Current symptoms reported for patients with COVID-19 have included mild to severe respiratory illness with fever, cough, and difficulty breathing.

### How is COVID-19 spread?

COVID-19 was first identified in China, and has spread primarily due to travelers who unknowingly contracted the virus and spread to other persons. Like the flu, COVID-19 spreads from person to person via coughing or sneezing or similar "droplets." Doctors also think it might be possible to get sick if you touch a surface that has the virus on it, then touch your mouth, nose, or eyes.

From what experts know so far, COVID-19 seems to spread most easily when people are showing symptoms. However, it is possible to spread it without having symptoms, although experts are less sure how often this can occur.

Take a look at this [simulator](#) to understand how social distancing is key to limiting the spread of the disease, and slowing the rate of rise of cases.

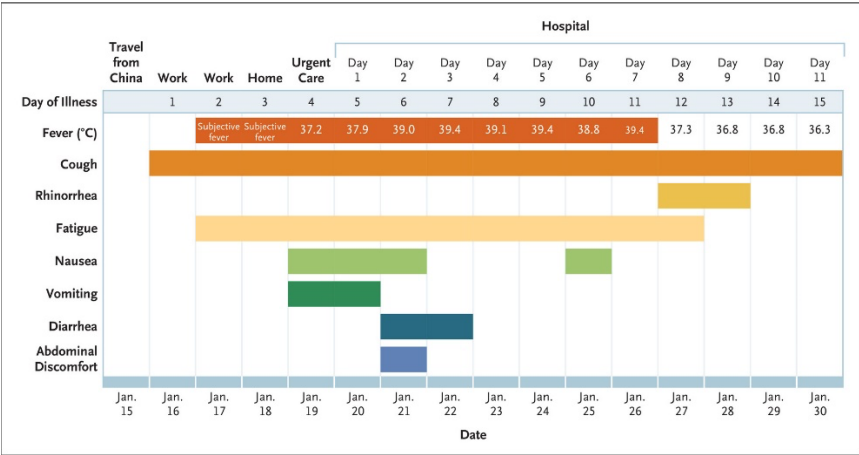
What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

Symptoms usually start a few days after a person is infected with the virus, however, in some people it can take even longer for symptoms to appear.

Symptoms can include:

1. Fever in 89-99 %
2. Fatigue in 70 %
3. Dry cough in 59 %
4. Anorexia (poor appetite) in 40 %
5. Myalgias in 35 %
6. Dyspnea in 31 %
7. Sputum production in 27 %

Diarrhea, rhinorrhea, headache, nausea, vomiting, sore throat/dry throat (<5%)



Source: Holshue; [March 5, 2020](#); N Engl J Med 2020; 382:929-936; DOI:10.1056/NEJMoa2001191

Most people have mild symptoms, while others have no symptoms at all. In some cases, however, COVID-19 can lead to serious problems like pneumonia, oxygen deprivation, or even death. This is more common in people who are older or who have other health problems.

While children can get COVID-19, they seem less likely to have severe symptoms.

If you think you might have been exposed to COVID-19 and are experiencing a fever, a cough, or are having trouble breathing, call your doctor or nurse. You might have been exposed if any of the following happened within the last 14 days:

- **You had close contact with a person who has the virus** – This generally means being within about 6 feet of the person.
- **You lived in, or have traveled to, an area where lots of people have the virus** – The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has information about which areas are affected.

- **You went to an event or location where there were known cases of COVID-19** – For example, if multiple people got sick after a specific gathering or in your workplace, you might have been exposed.

Even if you are severely ill and need to go to the clinic or a hospital right away, you should still call ahead. This allows the staff to prepare for you while taking steps to protect others.

### Will I need tests?

If your doctor or nurse suspects you have COVID-19, they will take samples of fluid from inside your nose and send them to a lab for testing. These tests can show if you have COVID-19 or another infection. Currently Artesia General Hospital and NMHOS have test kits available for PCR testing to detect the virus. The turnaround time is up to 48-72 hours.

NMHOS is currently working to have on-site testing available for all its high-risk cancer patients which may include Antibody testing to detect the presence of COVID antibodies that suggest recent or distant infection. An IgG antibody test can suggest possible immunity if one has been exposed to COVID and recovered but may not have known about it. The level of immunity would depend on amount of antibody response generated. We will update you as more testing is available.

### How is COVID-19 treated?

Most people with COVID-19 have only mild illness and can rest at home until they get better. People with mild symptoms seem to get better after about 2 weeks, but it's not the same for everyone. If you have COVID-19, it's important to stay home from school or work until your doctor or nurse tells you it's safe to go back.

There are **no known antivirals** to treat COVID-19. **Tamiflu** or other antivirals are not effective against SARS-CoV-2. A randomized clinical trial has begun at the [National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases \(NIAID\)](#), which is part of the National Institutes of Health. This trial aims to evaluate the safety and efficacy of the investigational antiviral **Remdesivir** in hospitalized adults diagnosed with coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). This is the first clinical trial in the United States to evaluate an experimental treatment for COVID-19. **Hydroxychloroquine** (Plaquenil) has some anecdotal evidence, however in combination with Azithromycin as reported in media can be hazardous for cardiac patients and may cause serious cardiac conduction abnormalities. This combination should not be used unless under physician approval.

If you have more severe illness, you might need to stay in the hospital, possibly in the intensive care unit (also called the "ICU"). While you are there, you will most likely be in a special "isolation" room. Only medical staff will be allowed in the room, and they will have to wear special gowns, gloves, masks, and eye protection. There is no specific treatment for COVID-19, but the doctors and nurses in the hospital can monitor and support your breathing and other body functions and make you as comfortable as possible.

You might need extra oxygen to help you breathe easily. If you are having a very hard time breathing, you might need to be put on a ventilator. This is a machine to help you breathe.

## Can COVID-19 be prevented?

There are things you can do to reduce your chances of getting COVID-19. These steps are a good idea for everyone, but especially for people age 65 years or older, patients on chemotherapy or biologicals that affect your immune system or those who have other health problems:

- **Wash your hands** with soap and water often. This is especially important after being in public and touching other people or surfaces. Make sure to rub your hands with soap for at least 20 seconds, cleaning your wrists, fingernails, and in between your fingers. Then rinse your hands and dry them with a paper towel you can throw away.
- If you are not near a sink, you can use a **hand gel** to clean your hands. The gels with at least 60 percent alcohol work the best. But it is better to wash with soap and water if you can.
- **Avoid touching your face** with your hands, especially your mouth, nose, or eyes.
- **Try to stay away from people who have any symptoms** of the infection.
- **Avoid crowds** if possible. If you live in an area where there have been cases of COVID-19, try to stay home as much as you can.
- Some experts recommend **avoiding travel** to certain countries where there are a lot of cases of COVID-19.

Experts do **not** recommend wearing a face mask if you are not sick, unless you are caring for someone who has (or might have) COVID-19. More evidence, however, has come to light that suggests wearing surgical or cloth masks may reduce infection risk. [The National Institute of Health website](#) has resources on making [home cloth masks](#).

If someone in your home has COVID-19, there are additional things you can do to protect yourself:

- **Keep the sick person away from others** – The sick person should stay in a separate room and use a separate bathroom if possible.
- **Use face masks** – The sick person should wear a face mask when they are in the same room as other people. If you are caring for the sick person, you can also protect yourself by wearing a face mask when you are in the room. This is especially important if the sick person cannot wear a mask.
- **Be extra careful around body fluids** – If you will be in contact with the sick person's blood, mucus, or other body fluids, wear a disposable face mask, gown, and gloves. If any body fluids touch your skin, wash your hands with soap right away.
- **Clean often** – It's especially important to clean things that are touched a lot. This includes counters, bedside tables, doorknobs, computers, phones, and bathroom surfaces. Some cleaning products work well to kill bacteria, but not viruses, so it's important to check labels. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has a list of products here: [www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2020-03/documents/sars-cov-2-list\\_03-03-2020.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2020-03/documents/sars-cov-2-list_03-03-2020.pdf).
- **Wash hands** – Wash your hands with soap and water often (see above).

While there is not yet a vaccine to prevent COVID-19, a Phase I clinical trial for a vaccine has started in the US. Labs in Europe and US may take 6-18 months to prepare a vaccine.

## Should I take medications to prevent COVID-19 if I am immunocompromised?

COVID-19 is a virus and antibiotics have no effectiveness in treating this viral infection, and cannot prevent infection with COVID-19. At this time none of the current antiviral medications have shown any benefit in preventing infection with COVID-19. The best measures are social distancing and handwashing.

## What is the risk of a blood transfusion?

Blood donors will be screened for COVID-19, however there is currently no evidence that this infection is transmitted by blood. There is however a nationwide shortage of blood donations due to social distancing.

## How can I prepare for this?

It is hard to predict where future outbreaks might happen. The best thing you can do to stay healthy is to wash your hands regularly, avoid close contact with people who are sick, and stay home if you are sick.

## Wash hands... (Correctly)!

A quick splash of soap and water isn't enough. Five simple steps improve hand washing and infection control. You can watch some helpful YouTube videos on the technique or visit [CDC handwashing page](#) for a graphical presentation on the technique.

1. **Wet your hands with clean, running water (warm or cold), turn off the tap, and apply soap.** Don't use a basin of standing water. Turning off the tap helps to conserve clean water.
2. **Lather all parts of your hands by rubbing them together with the soap.** Be sure to lather the backs of your hands, between your fingers, and particularly under your nails.
3. **Scrub your hands for at least 20 seconds.** This is the time it takes to hum the "Happy Birthday" song from beginning to end twice.
4. **Rinse your hands well under clean, running water.** If the water does not automatically shut off, there is no clear data supporting use of a paper towel to shut off the tap, and using the rinsed hands to turn off the tap reduces paper waste.
5. **Dry your hands using a clean towel or air dry them.** Germs can be transferred more easily to and from wet hands, so drying hands after washing is advisable for further protection.

## Use Alcohol-Based Hand Sanitizers

**Soap and water are the preferred method** to clean hands, because washing removes many pathogens and toxic substances. When washing with soap and running water isn't feasible, alcohol-based hand sanitizers may be helpful with the following caveats:

**Select a product with at least 60% alcohol (Purell or any non-branded product will do). If there is a shortage of these in your area consider making your own, using the following recipe.**

- 3/4 cup of isopropyl or **rubbing alcohol** (99 percent)
- 1/4 cup of **aloe vera gel** (to help keep your hands smooth and to counteract the harshness of alcohol)
- 10 drops of essential oil, such as lavender oil, or you can use lemon juice instead.

Here's another recipe that's less sticky and more potent, based on a mix recommended by the World Health Organization.

- Mix 1 2/3 cups alcohol (As long as it is greater than 60%) with 2 teaspoons of glycerol. You can buy jugs of glycerol online, and it's an important ingredient because it keeps the alcohol from drying out your hands. If you can't find glycerol, proceed with the rest of the recipe anyway and just remember to moisturize your hands after applying the sanitizer.
- Mix in 1 tablespoon of hydrogen peroxide, then another 1/4 cup of distilled or boiled (then cooled) water. (If you're working with a lower-concentration solution of rubbing alcohol, use far less water; remember, at least 2/3 of your final mixture has to be alcohol.)
- Load the solution into spray bottles—this isn't a gel, it's a spray. You can wet a paper towel with it as well and use that as a wipe.

**Apply the alcohol-based product to the palm of one hand.** Use the amount recommended on the product label, enough to cover all hand surfaces.

**Rub the product all over the surfaces of your hands.** Just as with soap and water, all surfaces including under the nails need decontamination.

**Continue to rub the product into hand surfaces until hands are dry.** Wiping sanitizer off before it dries will reduce effectiveness.

## Avoid Close Personal Contact with Infected Persons

Close contact with an infected person increases risk for COVID-19 transmission.

The Centers for Disease Control and prevention (CDC) defines close contact as:

- a) being within approximately **6 feet**, close contact can include caring for, living with, visiting, or sharing a health care waiting area or room with a novel coronavirus case. – or –
- b) having direct contact with infectious secretions of a novel coronavirus case (e.g., being coughed on)



## Practice Respiratory Hygiene

Instruct sick patients to:

- Use face masks or tissues to cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, then dispose of tissues and contaminated items in the trash.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.
- Wash hands (correctly).
- Stay at home when sick
- Only call your physician's office for instructions regarding care for an acute respiratory disease causing severe symptoms.

## Household Cleaning & Disinfection

**Cleaning** refers to removal of dirt and germs from surfaces without necessarily killing the infectious agents on those surfaces; however, cleaning can reduce infection transmission by reducing viral particles on surfaces.

**Disinfection** refers to killing of infectious agents using chemicals. Disinfection does not clean the surface, so generally a surface is first cleaned and then disinfected.

**Routine cleaning and disinfection of high-touch surfaces** (doorknobs, light switches, elevator buttons, handles, tables, banisters, phones, desks, toilets, faucets, sinks) is necessary during pandemic conditions. Use household cleaners and disinfectants appropriate for the surface. Diluted household bleach solutions can be used, if appropriate for the surface. Never mix household bleach with ammonia or any other cleanser. Follow the label instructions, wear gloves if available, and ensure good ventilation during use of the product. Follow all cleaning with hand hygiene, even if gloves were used.

Prepare a bleach solution by mixing:

- 5 tablespoons (1/3<sup>rd</sup> cup) bleach per gallon of water or
- 4 teaspoons bleach per quart of water

Here is a great link from the CDC regarding [surface cleaning](#).

## Social Distancing

Social distancing is a societal change in group interactions in order to reduce the likelihood of close contact with an infected person. Groups of people can minimize the risk of virus transmission through social interactions by engaging in group behavioral changes (cancellation of group events, limitations on event size, virtual interaction options, etc).

## What to Do if You Are Sick with COVID-19 symptoms

If you or a family member has or develops any respiratory symptoms (cough, shortness of breath) or fever, call **855-600-3453**.

Let your physician's office know that you have done that.

Seek prompt medical attention Artesia General Hospital only if your illness is worsening (e.g., difficulty breathing). **Before** seeking care, call your healthcare provider and tell them that you may have COVID-19. You will be asked to put on a facemask, to avoid passing the infection to others, before you enter the facility.

## Should I wear a face mask?

There is some developing evidence that indicates wearing a facemask can help **prevent** spreading the infection. This research suggests either [cloth masks](#) or surgical masks should be considered for those with an active cough, and that their family members should also consider wearing cloth masks while in a public location.

However, masks will not guarantee protection from getting an infection. COVID-19 is spread by droplets; and as masks become damp and fail, they may actually increase the risk of infection for compromised individuals. Social distancing with at least 6 feet between individuals is more effective than a face mask, and washing hands is absolutely crucial.

## Can I use NSAIDs?

Some reports have circulated regarding the use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) in worsening COVID inpatients. As of now, these restrictions on NSAIDs only apply to patients seriously affected by COVID. Most hospital and CDC guidelines have NOT suggested limiting use of NSAIDs when used for other reasons. If you use NSAID for pain management, you may continue to do so.

## Information for NMHOS Cancer Patients

### Will my follow-up appointments be affected?

We will be reviewing all of the upcoming appointments, and your appointment may be changed. If you are currently on active treatment for a cancer or hematology, and have a follow-up in less than 3 months, you will likely be asked to come in as scheduled. Our office will be calling to ask you questions regarding symptoms and travel history prior to the appointment. If you are scheduled for a follow up on a 6 month to 1 year schedule, we will likely extend the date for your next appointment by a month (if that follow-up is scheduled before May 1, 2020). This allows for the recommended social distancing and protects you from being potentially exposed.

### Will my scans and or biopsy schedule change?

We will review the upcoming scheduled imaging and biopsy appointments, and if appropriate we will reschedule the appointment. If you have any questions regarding these tests, please give our office a call and we can help to update you. Any changes will only be short delays, to be reset within a month. You will be given prior notice of any changes, or any requirement when you are to come in for testing. This may include entry through another location at the hospital, or screening prior to the appointment.

### I have lymphoma/leukemia, should I continue my infusion treatments?

Blood cancers and their treatments severely suppress the immune system and these patients have been known to be particularly high risk. You need to advise your doctor or nurse if you are experiencing a fever or cough, or if you have been in contact with someone who has been diagnosed with COVID-19. You may undergo further screening prior to treatment, and your treatment may be delayed; but there is no reason to delay treatment if you are otherwise healthy and without fever and cough. Practice good hand washing and social distancing to avoid exposure.

### I am scheduled for chemotherapy for Solid cancer – should I continue?

While chemotherapy side effects often include reduced blood counts, in many cases these are mitigated by growth factors given at the time of treatment to increase cells involved with fighting infections.

Chemotherapy could place you at risk of serious coronavirus-related complications, and for this reason, it is recommended that patients practice social distancing, limit social visits from others, perform hand hygiene frequently, avoid touching the face with unwashed hands, use hand sanitizer when unable to wash hands. Another method is to avoid situations where you are forced into a crowded environment, like having your groceries or meals delivered instead of going to the store.

As of now, ASCO guidelines do not suggest withholding cancer treatments unless a patient has a COVID diagnosis. Withholding treatment may negatively affect cancer outcomes.

### Should my cancer surgery be delayed?

Most curative cancer surgeries are time sensitive, and therefore should go ahead if possible. Artesia General Hospital, NMHOS and our committed surgeons will try our best to not delay any urgent surgeries. However if a procedure is deemed not urgent, we may move the procedure dates. This will be determined on a case-by-case basis.

### Should I continue my radiation treatment?

NMHOS recognizes that the risks of delaying treatment for patients with rapidly progressing, potentially curable tumors may outweigh the risks of COVID-19 exposure/infection. Therefore, most curative radiation sessions will continue. Patients receiving radiation for symptom control, or those who are at a low risk of harm due to schedule alterations, may potentially be delayed if it is safe enough to do so. Patients should check with their radiation oncologist to determine the most appropriate course of action for their treatment. NMHOS will continue working closely with our patients and their radiation teams.

### Should I continue my Immunosuppressive therapy or Immunotherapy?

No direct evidence supports changing or withholding chemotherapy or immunotherapy in patients with cancer. Therefore, routinely withholding critical anti-cancer or immunosuppressive or immunotherapy therapy is not recommended.

Please keep in mind the following points, however, and be prepared to discuss them with your team:

For patients in deep remission, who are receiving maintenance therapy only, stopping chemotherapy may be an option.

Some chemotherapy patients may be able to switch from IV to oral therapies. This would decrease the frequency of clinic visits, but the patient would need to be sure that they are taking their medicine correctly, and the healthcare team would need to be more vigilant.

Any decisions made about modifying or withholding chemotherapy should include consideration of the chemotherapy indication, the goals of care, where the patient is in the course of their treatment, as well as their tolerance of treatment. For example, the risk/benefit assessment for proceeding with chemotherapy in patients with untreated extensive lung cancer is different from that for patients on maintenance treatment for lung cancer when their disease is already in remission. These discussions will be held on a case by case basis.

If local transmission affects a particular cancer center, it may be reasonable to pause chemotherapy for two weeks, arrange for an infusion at an unaffected satellite unit, or at another facility that is not

affected. Our infusion center will hopefully be open soon, and that will give us another treatment option closer to home.

In cases where the absolute benefit of adjuvant chemotherapy may be quite small, and where non-immunosuppressive options are available (e.g. hormonal therapy in ER+ early-stage breast cancer), risk of infection with COVID-19 may be considered as an additional factor in weighing different options available to the patient.

### Where should I get more information?

While there are many useful websites providing relevant information from many sources, we would suggest [ASCO COVID resource](#) for cancer patients, [CDC website](#) and [NMDOH website](#) for updates, or the [NMHOS | Artesia General Hospital website](#).

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