

# AAFP COVID-19 – Talking Points

*Updated 3/6/20 – DO NOT DISTRIBUTE*

COVID-19 is a rapidly evolving situation. We are learning more every day about the virus, but there are still many unknowns. The ability to detect the virus and respond will be key. Our priority is to serve the immediate needs of our members so they can prepare their office, provide care to patients and prevent spread of the virus. We are closely aligned with the CDC and physician experts, and monitoring CDC guidance on a frequent basis.

## Overall message

(approved PR statement from Dr. Gary Leroy on 3/4/20) – Please use with media and appropriate.

- “The American Academy of Family Physicians, with guidance from the CDC, advises anyone who suspects that they may have come in contact with the coronavirus to contact their family physician’s office prior to seeking care in person to determine the best course of action. This will allow the patient to receive early medical guidance and enable the medical team to prepare accordingly should they suspect the patient does have the virus. As with any other illness or health condition, if a patient is experiencing life threatening symptoms such as trouble breathing, they should seek immediate medical attention. “

## The basics of COVID-19

- **What is COVID-19?** An outbreak of respiratory disease caused by a novel (new) coronavirus that was first detected in China and which has now been detected in almost 70 locations internationally, including the US. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/summary.html>
- **A bigger threat:** According to the CDC, the 2018-2019 flu season has sickened at least 35 million across the U.S. and led to 34,000 deaths and 490,000 hospitalizations <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/burden/2018-2019.html>. It remains a concern for AAFP and all member offices.
- **Is COVID-19 considered a pandemic?** At this time, the World Health Organization has not officially deemed COVID-19 an pandemic. Unless this occurs, we should continue to refer to COVID-19 as an outbreak.

## Medical office preparedness

- Family physicians are on the front lines of providing patient care. Members should prepare for an influx of patients with respiratory symptoms and concerns. Even if a community hasn’t seen cases, office preparedness is priority right now as cases increase around the country.
- **Triage protocols for family physicians:** The AAFP has worked with physician and infectious disease experts to create a checklist for physicians to prepare their offices for COVID-19. This protocol is drawn from existing pandemic resources but customized to help family physicians manage suspected cases and can be found on the [AAFP Coronavirus webpage](#).
- **FPM article for easy physician reference:** [Coronavirus: six ways to prepare your practice now](#)

## Advising patients

Encourage patients to talk with their family physician when they start display symptoms and before seeking emergency care. Similar to the flu outbreak, if they have symptoms, they should call first to prevent possible spread in the medical office and allow the office to guide the patient in next steps. The goal is to keep mild cases out of the medical offices and minimize transmission.

- **Identifying COVID-19:** Symptoms are similar to SARS, MERS and influenza. Patients may present with cough, fever, myalgias and shortness of breath, but they may vary by patient as well. Symptoms range from very mild to very severe. If a patient has traveled to a country with significant outbreak (i.e. China) or has been in close contact with a confirmed case and they present with a cough or cold/respiratory symptoms, they should be a patient under investigation.
- Currently the CDC recommends a cautious approach to patients that have suspected COVID-19. More guidance can be found in CDC's [Criteria to Guide Evaluation of PUI for COVID-19](#).
- **When to seek care/emergency care:** If a patient is experiencing life threatening symptoms like difficulty breathing, even if they haven't been diagnosed with COVID-19, they should seek immediate medical attention. They may require hospitalization or supportive therapy.
- **Testing:** Tests are not broadly available at this time. However, patients may expect to receive the test, and you need guidance on how to assess patient risk and make testing decisions. It's still uncertain when the test will be readily available to health care facilities and providers. The AAFP is actively communicating with HHS and CDC about testing issues and will share guidance to our members as we learn information.

The CDC also advises clinicians to test for other causes of respiratory illness, including infections such as influenza before a COVID-19 diagnosis. They ask that physicians take into consideration if local COVID-19 cases exist to determine need for testing. If a physician feels they have a patient(s) who needs to be tested, we advise them to work with their local and state public health departments to understand test availability and ensure proper reporting to the CDC.

## Payment

- We understand that payment for testing and health care services from commercial payers is becoming a concern. There are too many unknowns regarding payment, so we don't have details to share at this time. We will monitor and provide updates as the situation evolves.

## Prevention

People are asking how to protect themselves from contracting and spreading the virus.

- Stay vigilant but try not to panic.
- Wash hands frequently. Soap and water are effective at killing this virus. Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom, before eating, and after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing.
  - If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. Always wash hands with soap and water if hands are visibly dirty.
  - Refrain from touching your face – that increases likelihood of transfer of respiratory illness.

- Stay home when sick. Try to avoid people who are sick or meeting in large groups.
  - You may be contagious before you have symptoms and after you start to feel better.
- Stay away from people at risk - avoid young children and babies, pregnant women, people age 65 or older, and anyone with a chronic condition, such as asthma.
- Get a flu shot if haven't been immunized. It doesn't prevent COVID-19, but flu activity remains high and can reduce the likelihood of becoming ill from influenza.
- **Using masks:** Masks aren't effective for a healthy person. They are intended for those that are already sick to prevent the transfer of respiratory droplets. Health care workers need them, as they have much higher exposure risk than the general population. This will help control the spread of illness within practices.
- **Health care worker exposure:** We know health care professionals are at a higher risk of exposure to COVID-19 and should follow their office's established infection control protocols.

### Possible exposure/quarantine protocol questions

Many members have questions about responses to possible exposures and quarantine procedures. AAFP is constantly monitoring quarantine recommendations as they continue to evolve and will regularly providing members updates on our COVID-19 webpage.

- **What if I'm exposed?** See the CDC's [Interim U.S. Guidance for Risk Assessment and Public Health Management of Healthcare Personnel with Potential Exposure in a Healthcare Setting to Patients with Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)
- **What if I have an affected patient that comes into the office?** Reference [CDC's Infection Control Guidance](#) for confirmed COVID-19 or suspected cases.
- **How do I advise on the quarantine process?** The CDC has two resources you can reference:
  - In the medical office: [Interim Infection Prevention and Control Recommendations for Patients with Confirmed Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) or Persons Under Investigation for COVID-19 in Healthcare Settings](#)
  - In the home: [Interim Guidance for Implementing Home Care of People Not Requiring Hospitalization for 2019 Novel Coronavirus \(2019-nCoV\)](#).
- **How do I report cases?** The CDC and AAFP advise all physicians to report incidence information to their local public health department. See the [Directory of Local Health Departments](#).

The CDC has published [interim guidance for health care facilities](#) from pandemic resource. We'll continue to monitor updates from the CDC for more specific information.

### Resources for AAFP members

To support your practice as this situation evolves, the AAFP is curating and sharing resources that are relevant for family physicians.

- **Dedicated website:** <https://www.aafp.org/patient-care/emergency/2019-coronavirus.html> - Includes patient education, clinical management and preparedness resources.
- **Online community:** AAFP launched the [COVID-19 Rapid Response Member Exchange](#) community to offer members, staff and chapter staff a place for real-time conversations, questions and information sharing.

### Travel concerns and AAFP events

- Regarding travel concerns, the AAFP urges you to follow CDC's travel advisories for guidance on how to advise patients who have traveled or are planning to travel.  
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html>
- After careful consideration, we have decided that, for now, all upcoming AAFP events will go on as planned. Here is what we are doing to keep the health of our attendees at the forefront:
  - We are in close contact with all of our event venues to ensure they are taking appropriate precautions to keep the venues clean and disinfected and provide adequate supplies for attendees to wash and/or sanitize their hands.
  - We will ask attendees who are sick or exhibiting symptoms to refrain from attending the event.
  - The AAFP will continue to monitor the situation and reassess hosting various events as appropriate. Some items that will warrant cancelations include a government ban on travel or closure of the venue, hotel or local airport.