



# COVID-19

## **What can Alaskans do to prepare for the novel coronavirus (COVID-19)?**

*Updated March 15, 2020*

### **Can we expect COVID-19 cases to occur in Alaska?**

There is currently one confirmed case in Alaska. This is a travel-associated case of COVID-19, not a case of community-acquired infection. As transmission occurs in more and more places around the world, it is increasingly likely that outbreaks will occur in the United States, including Alaska. If an outbreak does occur in Alaska, it could cause many people to become ill in a short period of time. This could stress our health care system and disrupt many of our regular activities, including school, work and social events. As such we need to work together to be as prepared as possible.

### **How contagious and deadly is this virus?**

While we still have much to learn about this new disease, it appears to be more transmissible than the seasonal flu but less transmissible than measles. Current research so far indicates that each infected person transmits the virus to about 2.5 other people on average. The case fatality rate for this disease is not known as it is still early in the outbreak. Current data show that the case fatality is about 2–3%, but the actual case fatality rate may be lower because it's likely that many people with milder illness are not being identified. For perspective, the estimated COVID-19 case fatality rate is considerably higher than seasonal flu (<0.1%), but lower than SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome, ≈10%).

### **Why is everyone bringing up influenza in the context of COVID-19?**

While the flu vaccine does not protect against COVID-19, flu symptoms are similar to COVID-19 symptoms and require similar resources. Our health care system will be better able to manage a COVID-19 outbreak if we have fewer flu cases. Therefore, we are urging everyone over six months of age to get their annual flu vaccine if they haven't already done so. Seasonal influenza activity typically continues into April or May. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that about 8% of the U.S. population gets the flu every year, resulting in hundreds of thousands of hospitalizations and tens of thousands of deaths.

### **What happens if the new coronavirus spreads to Alaska?**

If we have just a few cases, disruptions to daily life will probably not be significant. But if community spread begins to occur, Alaskans should be prepared for changes to their daily

routines. For example, we might implement some or all of the following measures to slow the spread of the disease.

- Schools or child care facilities may be temporarily dismissed.
- Workplaces may encourage working from home and may replace in-person meetings with teleconferences.
- Community gatherings may be modified, postponed, or canceled.

These measures may be implemented even if the number of cases of COVID-19 in the community is fairly small.

### **What should Alaskans do to prevent the spread of respiratory infections?**

- Keep at least 6 feet away from ill people who are coughing or sneezing.
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for 20 seconds. If you don't have soap and water, use alcohol-based hand sanitizer that is at least 60% alcohol.
- Try to avoid touching your face, mouth, nose, and eyes.
- Routinely clean frequently touched objects and surfaces, including toys, doorknobs, keyboards, and phones.
- If you begin to feel ill, stay home! Stay home for at least 24 hours after you no longer have a fever without the use of fever-reducing medicines.
  - Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue and throw away the tissue after use. If you don't have a tissue, cough and sneeze into the inside of your elbow.
- If you think you have COVID-19, call ahead and make an appointment before seeing a clinician. This will help the health care provider's office take steps to keep other people from getting infected or exposed. When you call, make sure you tell the provider if you think you may have been exposed to the virus that causes COVID-19, either through travel or with a case of the disease.

### **What else can Alaskans be doing to prepare for COVID-19?**

- [Stay informed](#). Follow updates from public health officials as well as from schools and your employer.
- Whether for a pandemic, an earthquake, or some other disaster, Alaskans should have an emergency kit. Include supplies like soap, hand sanitizer, and tissues. If you or a family member regularly take a prescription medication, talk to your health care provider and pharmacist about getting a larger supply. Have any nonprescription drugs and other health supplies on hand, including pain relievers, stomach remedies, cough and cold medicines, fluids with electrolytes, and vitamins. For more information about emergency kits, please see this [information from CDC](#) and this information from the [Department of Homeland Security](#).
- When preparing a plan, consider the following.
  - If you have children, begin planning for the possibility of school dismissals. If you can't stay home with your children, could a neighbor or friend look after them? Ideally, children should be cared for in as small of groups as possible.
  - Get to know your neighbors and include their contact information in your plan.

- Public health officials may recommend that everyone in the household of an ill person stay home, not just the person who is sick. If this happens, can your neighbors shop for you and leave items you might need on your doorstep?
- Identify a room in your house to separate ill people from those who are healthy. Ideally, identify a bathroom that would only be used by those who are ill.
- Especially if you live alone, talk to your friends and family about what you might need. If you do fall ill, keep in touch by phone with a friend or family member.
- Do your part to fight fear, stigma, and misinformation that can surface when people are anxious about a new disease.

### **What should businesses and business owners be doing to prepare for the possibility of the new coronavirus spreading in Alaska?**

- Actively encourage sick employees to stay home. Send employees home if they become ill at work. Ensure sick leave policies that support this goal.
- Provide soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer to employees and encourage employees to wash their hands regularly. Place posters that encourage handwashing in kitchen and bathroom areas of your workplace.
- Routinely clean commonly touched objects, like doorknobs, phones and keyboards.
- Make a plan for your workplace. Your plan may have some or all of the following goals.
  - Reducing transmission among staff
  - Protecting people at higher risk of adverse health complications
  - Maintaining business operations
  - Minimizing disruptions to supply chains
- Prepare for high levels of absenteeism among employees. Employees may have to stay home if they are sick or to take care of children if schools are closed.
  - Identify essential functions you would prioritize even if many employees are absent and create a continuity of operations plan (COOP).
  - Crosstrain employees in order to more readily maintain these core functions.
- Identify ways to reduce contact between employees. Options include staggered shifts and telework.
- Plan for supply chain disruptions.
- Communicate these plans to employees and other stakeholders.
- Here are some helpful resources to help in your planning effort:
  - CDC: [Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers to Plan and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\), February 2020](#)
  - Anchorage Health Department: [COVID-19 Information for Businesses](#)

### **What should schools be doing?**

- Maintain awareness of the [COVID-19 situation](#).
- Review, update, and prepare to implement emergency operations plans (EOPs). Guidance for developing EOPs can be found [here](#).

- Emphasize actions such as staying home when sick; appropriately covering coughs and sneezes; cleaning frequently touched surfaces; and washing hands often. CDC offers [free health promotion materials](#) related to hand washing. Make sure staff and students have easy access to soap, hand sanitizer, and tissues.
- Begin planning now for the possibility of school dismissals or closures, or a need for social distancing measures in schools – communication with staff, families, and the community will be critical.
  - Work with public health to determine if, when, and for how long childcare programs or schools may need to be dismissed.
  - Make plans for continuity of education, meals, and other services for students.
- For more information, review [CDC's interim guidance for schools](#).

#### **What can we expect in rural areas?**

- While COVID-19 can be serious, many cases appear to have mild respiratory symptoms that do not require hospitalization. All patients suspected to have COVID-19 should be immediately put into isolation. This isolation might occur in a hospital or home setting, depending on available resources and the individual patient's situation.
- Some patients may be flown to hospitals elsewhere while others may be cared for within the community. Many people who contract COVID-19 do not get very sick and do not need to be hospitalized.

#### **How should Alaskans get ready to help others?**

Begin preparing yourself, your family, and your community. Understand that this may be a stressful situation and respond with calm, thoughtful planning, and intentional action. Alaskans are resilient and accustomed to preparing for whatever may come our way, and we are stronger together.

- Alaskans are known for helping each other when we are faced with obstacles, and this is the time to help each other.
- Stay calm and share accurate information.
- Talk to your neighbors, friends, and co-workers about how to help each other. Ask them if they have any special needs that should be considered in a health emergency.

#### **For more information:**

Visit [Prepare Your Health](#) to learn more about preparing your household for an emergency.

Updates will be posted to our [novel coronavirus](#) website.

The CDC provides [guidance on nonpharmaceutical interventions](#) to protect against COVID-19.

Learn more about community mitigation measures by reading [this CDC report](#).