

How to Keep the Coronavirus From Coming Home With You

Do you need to sanitize your groceries, takeout food containers, or mail to prevent the coronavirus? Here's what you need to know about keeping your family safe. By **Nicole Harris** March 27, 2020

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has caused thousands of illnesses across the country, and it's showing no signs of slowing. People have been practicing "social distancing" to stop the spread, and they've also been extra cautious about sanitization. That said, plenty of questions have popped up about what, exactly, is safe to bring into your home. Do you need to clean groceries and produce before putting them away? What about food delivery bags, packages, and your own clothing? We spoke with experts about the safety precautions that all Americans should be taking.

How Does the Coronavirus Spread?

To understand the precautions, you should first get an idea of how the coronavirus spreads. "The main mode of transmission is through droplets, which means the virus is in mucus that comes out when infected people sneeze or cough," explains Robert Frenck, M.D., medical director for the Division of Infectious Diseases at Cincinnati Children's Hospital. Droplets from coughs or sneezes can travel up to six feet, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which is why officials recommend staying at least six feet away from others during this time. You can still transmit the virus even when showing mild or no symptoms.

The coronavirus could also spread through "direct contact" with an infected person, adds Dr. Frenck. Say someone coughs or sneezes into their hand, and then they give you a handshake or high-five. Respiratory droplets might transfer onto your skin, and they can enter your body if you touch your nose, eyes, or mouth.

Finally, the coronavirus may be transmitted through infected surfaces—for example, a hand railing that someone coughed near. "We still are learning about the length of time the virus can survive off of the body," says Dr. Frenck. Depending on the

surface, it might stick around for several hours to several days. A March 2020 study from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) suggests that the coronavirus can survive for three hours in the air, four hours on copper, 24 hours on cardboard, and two to three days on stainless steel and plastic.

Can the Coronavirus Be Transmitted Through Food?

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), there isn't any evidence of food being associated with COVID-19 transmission. That means your groceries are probably safe. However, Dr. Frenck says it doesn't hurt to thoroughly wash fresh produce "to decrease the risk of acquiring coronavirus or other food-borne infections." Scrubbing fruits and vegetables under running water should suffice.

What About Packaging?

The FDA also hasn't found evidence of COVID-19 transmission through food packaging. But according to Dr. Frenck, "it appears the virus may be able to live up to 24 hours on cardboard, and less so on paper." That means your carry-out pizza packaging, pasta box, or grocery bags might possibly have traces of the coronavirus. One solution is throwing away unnecessary external packages—such as cereal boxes—and only keeping the plastic bag inside.

Consumer Reports also suggests washing non-porous packaging with disinfectant wipes, and cleaning countertops after putting everything away. "You can use regular household cleaners," says Dr. Frenck. "If the surface can have bleach on it, then a diluted bleach solution is a good disinfectant. Alcohol products with at least 60 percent alcohol also protect against coronavirus."

Can I Order Takeout or Delivery?

Since restaurants are closed, many people are supporting local businesses through takeout and delivery. But is this practice safe? “Any viral contamination in food likely would be killed in the cooking process,” explains Dr. Frenck. “The biggest risk from takeout or delivery would be the hands of the server. If they are using good hygiene and wearing gloves, the risk should be minimal.” Still, it doesn’t hurt to throw away external packaging immediately and wash your hands afterwards.

You should also practice social distancing with the delivery person, whether you’re getting takeout or ordering groceries. Avoid a direct hand-off by asking them to leave the food on your front porch. Make all your payments electronically, and don’t ask for a paper receipt.

Is It Safe to Receive Mail and Packages?

Again, the coronavirus may survive up to 24 hours on cardboard in ideal conditions, but “the likelihood that mail or a package would be able to transmit the virus is quite low,” says Dr. Frenck. “If you wanted to be extra cautious, you could wash your hands after opening the package. You could use a letter opener for letters, but this is likely more than is required.”

Should I Wash My Clothes After Going Out?

After leaving the house, you might be tempted to throw everything you’re wearing into the laundry. But this action is completely unnecessary—especially since the coronavirus doesn’t seem to last as long on porous fabrics. “The only exception would be if someone coughed or sneezed directly on your clothes,” says Dr. Frenck. You might also wash your clothes if you were in a large crowd with people brushing against you. Health care providers should, of course, clean clothing per their protocol.

The Bottom Line

Washing your hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds and following social distancing orders remain the best way to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. “If people are sick, they should not come over to your home. And if you are sick, you should stay home,” says Dr. Frenck.

- **By Nicole Harris**