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The Latest: Should You Change Your Travel Plans Due to the Coronavirus?

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Common sense is your best protection.

[Editor's note: This is an updated version of an earlier article that originally ran on January 28.]

Everyone's talking about the new coronavirus, and it can be hard to differentiate between the facts and misinformation. All over the world, measures are being taken to control and contain the virus, sometimes based on scientific evidence and sometimes more in response to fear. Here's what you need to know.

What is This New Virus?

In early January 2020, China and the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed the identification of a new virus. It stems from several cases of pneumonia identified in Wuhan, a city in the Chinese province of Hubei, on December 31, 2019. The new virus has been given the temporary name 2019-nCoV.

The virus is a [coronavirus](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/types.html). The common cold is a coronavirus, but so are more serious diseases like SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which caused a global epidemic in 2002-2004 that killed 774 people.
A Coronavirus—What’s That?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) describe coronaviruses as a type of virus that commonly causes a fever and symptoms of the upper respiratory system, like a sore throat, coughing, and a runny nose. Sometimes coronaviruses can cause more severe symptoms like difficulty breathing, illnesses of the lower respiratory system like bronchitis and pneumonia, and sometimes death. Coronaviruses were first identified in the 1960s and have “corona” in their name because, at the molecular level, they’re shaped like a halo.

Coronaviruses can infect humans and animals. When a virus jumps from an animal to a human, or vice versa, the virus can change rapidly and even become a new virus.

Scientists pay close attention to new viruses because they don’t know how they’ll behave and how dangerous they might be. For example, a virus that’s contagious only when the infected person is clearly sick and that causes only minor symptoms isn’t a big concern. But a virus that transmits rapidly, especially before an infected person even realizes they’re sick, is more dangerous, as is one that causes severe symptoms. Viruses that are transmitted by direct contact, like touching mucus membranes or bodily fluids, are easier to control than viruses that are transmitted through the air.

The new coronavirus 2019-nCoV is getting a lot of attention because it’s new and still poses many unknowns.

Now a Global Health Emergency

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization declared 2019-nCoV a global health emergency. The head of the WHO expressed concern about the virus spreading to countries with weaker health systems. When it made that declaration, the WHO noted:

- The belief that the spread of the virus can still be interrupted.
- A key purpose of the declaration was to allow the WHO to provide surveillance and treatment support to lower- and middle-income countries.
- No travel or trade restrictions were recommended.

Dr. William Spangler, Global Medical Director with AIG Travel, describes it as “more of a political statement than it is a medical statement.” As of February 9, 2020, the WHO’s advice to international travelers has not changed; it remains “practice usual precautions.”

The WHO also reminded countries of infection control advice and of countries’ legal obligations. Those obligations include sending the WHO rationale for measures that significantly interfere with international travel and trade and that the WHO can request countries reconsider measures put in place. The WHO also provided advice to countries about airport screening and information campaigns.
How Many People Are Sick?

As of February 9, 2020, there are more than 40,701 cases of 2019-nCoV and more than 904 people have died. Most of those are in mainland China, but the disease has spread to two dozen countries, including the United States.

Spangler says it’s likely “that the outbreak will spread and the death toll will increase before we see a plateau.” He adds that 2019-nCoV is not a pandemic and compares it to the 2009 H1N1 “Swine Flu” pandemic. Using the CDC’s statistics, he says “there were 60.8 million cases and 12,469 deaths in the U.S. alone” due to H1N1 and worldwide estimates are that “151,700 – 575,400 people died from H1N1 infection during the first year the virus circulated.”

The number of 2019-nCoV cases and deaths will continue to rise and we still need to learn a lot about it. But current evidence has experts believing it’s controllable. On February 6, 2020, China started a clinical trial of an antiviral called remdesivir.

Keeping flu statistics in mind might help put you at ease: During the current 2019-2020 flu season, it’s estimated that so far more than 15 million people in the U.S. have been sick with the flu and more than 8,000 have died from it. And many Americans aren’t getting a flu shot despite the number of deaths from flu. Last year, 62.6% of U.S. kids got a flu shot while only 45.3% of adults did.

Travel Restrictions

Many countries are evacuating their citizens from China and placing them in 14-day quarantine when they return home.

Countries are also screening arrivals at their borders, and some are restricting entry. The U.S. has suspended entry of non-U.S. residents and citizens who have, within the preceding 14 days, been in the People's Republic of China (excluding Hong Kong and Macau). Australia, New Zealand, and about 20 other countries have followed suit.

Many countries are asking citizens who have traveled to Asia to carefully monitor their health and to self-quarantine if they exhibit even mild symptoms. The United Kingdom has requested citizens follow this advice for the following countries: China (including Macao and Hong Kong), Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, Japan, Malaysia, and the Republic of Korea.

Cruise Ship Restrictions

Some cruise ships are also being delayed or prevented from docking and a few have been quarantined. In late January, Italy delayed a Costa Cruises ship from disembarking passengers near Rome until testing revealed a sick passenger had the flu, not 2019-nCoV. The Diamond Princess has been quarantined in Japanese waters until February 19, with 70 of the 3,700 aboard testing positive for 2019-nCoV as of February 9, 2020. The four-day quarantine of the World Dream in Hong Kong ended February 9, 2020, after coronavirus tests have come back negative. A Holland America ship, despite there being no evidence of anyone sick with coronavirus on board, was denied entry at three ports of call in early February. The cruise is scheduled to end February 15 in Japan.
Some cruise lines have also started restricting who can board. Some aren't allowing passengers who have been in China, including transiting through Chinese airports, up to 30 days before embarkation. On February 7, Royal Caribbean (https://www.royalcaribbean.com/cruise-ships/anthem-of-the-seas-updates) and Norwegian (https://www.ncl.com/ca/en/travel-alert/coronavirus) announced that passengers and crew with passports from China, Hong Kong and Macao—regardless of country of residence—are not allowed to board until further notice.

In January, many cruise lines have canceled or rerouted itineraries in China and have added additional pre-boarding health screenings. Cruise Critic (https://www.cruisecritic.com/news/5016/) is monitoring the situation and updates its website regularly.

**What Should I Do? Change My Travel Plans?**

Some infectious disease specialists (https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thehouse/chris-hall-was-ottawa-right-to-quarantine-canadians-evacuated-from-wuhan-1.5454763) are saying that not all of the restrictions are medically necessary (https://www.cbc.ca/news/opinion/opinion-coronavirus-sars-borders-goel-1.5452428) but are being put in place for political reasons and to encourage trust. Some decisions may even be driven by fear and xenophobia. Studies have shown that travel bans don't prevent outbreaks and can cause people to hide symptoms and not report to doctors. Travel bans can also have immense economic costs and increase—rather than decrease—fear.

Medically, trust the advice of reputable authorities like the WHO and the CDC. Following China’s implementation of travel restrictions to and from major epicenters like Wuhan, on January 24, 2020, the CDC (https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/warning/novel-coronavirus-china) issued a warning to avoid all nonessential travel to China. On January 30, 2020, the U.S. Department of State (https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel/International-Travel-Country-Information-Pages/China.html) changed their travel advisory from “reconsider travel to China” to “do not travel to China,” noting the travel restrictions put in place by Chinese authorities and the U.S. government’s “limited ability to provide emergency services to U.S. citizens.”

However, travelers now need to consider their post-travel plans as part of their decision to travel. If you have visited an at-risk country, you will be allowed to return to your home country, but might be asked to self-isolate for two weeks or may even face quarantine. People who have recently traveled in China and even people who have come within six feet of someone from China or Hong Kong are facing new restrictions. These may be expanded. As an example, a person planning to visit Hong Kong next week and take a Caribbean cruise next month might not be able to do both.

Many airlines are suspending flights to mainland China due to the outbreak, concern from flight crews, and declining customer demand. For example, on January 31, 2020, American Airlines said they will cancel flights to China between January 31 and March 27 and Delta Air Lines announced their cancellation window will be February 6 to April 30. United Airlines’ flights are suspended until March 28. Additional changes may come, so check directly with your airline or travel agent for the latest.

**Easy and Common Sense Protections**

Basically, if you follow the advice of health experts like the CDC and the WHO, the chance of getting sick from this new coronavirus remains slim. And not only is the advice pretty easy, it’s what we should all be doing anyway to prevent colds and flus.
• **Wash Your Hands:** A 20-second scrub using warm running water and soap is best (the Mayo Clinic (https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/hand-washing/art-20046253) says to sing “Happy Birthday” twice). Then, rinse with clean water and dry your hands. It’s important to dry them, though the jury is out about the best way (https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/blowing-hard-2/) (some studies say hot air blowers spread germs and that paper towels or clean fabric towels are best; other studies disagree). If you don’t have access to a sink, using a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol is fine. Regardless, wash your hands often: certainly after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose; before you prepare food; before and after eating, and after using the restroom. And throw those used tissues away immediately (and then wash your hands!).

• **Avoid Touching Your Face:** Most viruses and bacteria enter the body through mucous membranes like the mouth, nose, and eyes. It’s easy to re-contaminate your hands after washing them, so keeping your hands away from your face is the best way to prevent germs of any type from getting in you and making you sick.

• **Cough and Sneeze Into Your Elbow:** Yes, covering your cough or sneeze with your hand is preferable to spraying all those tiny virusy droplets directly into the air. But then you’ve contaminated your hand and you’ll inevitably touch something or someone. So, make a new habit of coughing/sneezing into the inside of your elbow. And while you’re at it, break that other habit of crossing your arms and putting your hands right onto your sneeze spots.

People who have higher risks—the immunosuppressed, very old, or very young—should follow the advice of their doctor.

**Extra Protections**

Still feeling a little paranoid? It’s good practice to regularly disinfect surfaces that get handled frequently (your phone is filthy (https://www.thehealthsite.com/diseases-conditions/how-dirty-is-your-phone-305672/)). On the plane, you can also use a wipe to clean off your tray table, armrests, and seatbelt, though the evidence is unclear whether this is effective in killing germs or just cleaning up that bit of sticky spilled Coke.

It’s wise to keep your distance from sick people. No hugs, kisses, or handshakes, please. And really, during cold and flu season why not keep close contact just for loved ones?

At restaurants, do an extra hand wash, ideally after you’ve given back the menu and before you start to eat. At a buffet, only put food on a clean plate; don’t bring your used plate back to the smorgasbord. And while we’re at it, let’s call a halt to waiters at fancy restaurants picking up your used napkin and refolding it when you step away from the table. Let’s all just keep our germs to ourselves, yes?
Should I Wear a Mask?

Speaking of keeping your germs to yourself: if you're sick, wearing a mask is a courtesy to the people around you. You’ll be less likely to spread your illness when you cough, sneeze, laugh or talk. But masks aren’t perfect. It’s hard to keep one on when you’re already having difficulty breathing. And most of us don’t use masks correctly. We fidget with them, put them on and off without washing our hands, and re-use masks that are meant to be single-use. Plus, people using masks when they don’t need them diminishes the supply for those that do.

The CDC is recommending that caregivers wear a disposable mask when touching a person sick with 2019-nCoV or when they have contact with the person’s body fluids, like disposing of their used tissues.

What If I’m Sick?

Avoid traveling if you feel sick. Your would-be fellow passengers will appreciate you protecting them (even if it’s just from the common cold). Given the increased monitoring since the discovery of the new coronavirus, travelers who do show signs of illness could be prevented from boarding a plane, cruise, train, or bus. Many airports and seaports have installed thermal imaging cameras to scan people as they walk by. Anyone showing a fever is pulled aside for additional questioning and maybe quarantine.

If you exhibit symptoms of the coronavirus—fever, cough, and difficulty breathing—follow the instructions of your health care provider as soon as possible. Usually, this means calling ahead to your doctor or hospital so that they can take precautions to isolate you from other patients while they carry out testing. Be sure to advise doctors if you’ve been traveling.

Where to Get Updated Information

A new virus like this coronavirus means a rapidly changing situation. Scientists at the WHO and CDC have the up-to-date intel on the virus. They provide information, advice, and, if needed, travel restrictions with the goal of preventing a pandemic. Rely on their advice at the WHO’s and CDC’s websites.

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