

Coronavirus Q-and-A



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In late 2019, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) surfaced as a news item. In January, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) established a COVID-19 incident management system and activated its emergency operations system to better provide ongoing support to the COVID-19 response. Their initial information was very limited and as such, the initial information shared by USPS at the Headquarters level also was very limited. Since then, the CDC has ramped up.

In March, I joined a web conference hosted by the National Safety Council (NSC) working with the CDC. The keynote speaker was Ian Williams, Ph.D., who was identified as a deputy incident manager for the

CDC.

As of that briefing, Williams indicated that 650 cases had been identified in 36 states, resulting in 25 deaths. He highlighted a higher risk area in the North Bay area in California and in Seattle, WA.

Williams went on to address a number of topics and then drew our attention to the information posted by the CDC. The majority of what follows comes directly from the CDC.gov website, and is intended to provide many of our non-computer-using members with that information.

For those of you who are computer users, get on your computer or smartphone and go to the CDC's main page (cdc.gov). You will note that COVID-19 is highlighted as a key item in the "Outbreaks" section. Click on COVID-19, which will take you to the main page for this disease.

The first section identifies the higher risk categories as:

Older adults; people who have serious chronic medical conditions like heart disease; diabetes; and lung disease.

If a COVID 19 outbreak happens in your community, it could last for a long time. (An outbreak is when a large number of people suddenly get sick.) Depending on how severe the outbreak is, public health officials may recommend community actions to reduce people's risk of being exposed to COVID 19. These actions can slow the spread and reduce the impact of disease.

If you are at higher risk for serious illness from COVID 19 because of your age or because you have a serious long term health problem, it is extra important for you to take actions to reduce your risk of getting sick with the disease.

The second section identifies how the disease is spread

(transmission). In that section you will find:

How COVID 19 Spreads

Person to person spread

The virus is thought to spread mainly from person to person—between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet); through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs.

Can someone spread the virus without being sick?

People are thought to be most contagious when they are most symptomatic (the sickest). Some spread might be possible before people show symptoms; there have been reports of this occurring with this new coronavirus, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads.

Spread from contact with contaminated surfaces or objects

It may be possible that a person can get COVID 19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads.

How easily the virus spreads

How easily a virus spreads from person to person can vary. Some viruses are highly contagious (spread easily), like measles, while other viruses do not spread as easily. Another factor is whether the spread is sustained, spreading continually without stopping.

The virus that causes COVID 19 seems to be spreading easily and sustainably in the community ("community spread") in some affected geographic areas.

"Go to cdc.gov and read the information for yourself."

The third section identifies the symptoms to watch for:

Reported illnesses have ranged from mild symptoms to severe illness and death for confirmed coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID 19) cases.

The following symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure: fever; cough; shortness of breath.

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Coronavirus Q-and-A (continued)

Call your doctor if you develop symptoms, and have been in close contact with a person known to have COVID 19 OR have recently traveled from an area with widespread or ongoing community spread of COVID 19.

The fourth section links you to “Prevention and Treatment,” which includes the following:

Take steps to protect yourself

Clean your hands often. Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds especially after you have been in a public place, or after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing. If soap and water are not readily available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together until they feel dry. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.

Avoid close contact

Avoid close contact with people who are sick. Put distance between yourself and other people if COVID 19 is spreading in your community. This is especially important for people who are at higher risk of getting very sick.

Take steps to protect others

Stay home if you're sick

Stay home if you are sick, except to get medical care. Cover coughs and sneezes. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze or use the inside of your elbow. Throw used tissues in the trash.

Immediately wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not readily available, clean your hands with a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.

Wear a facemask if you are sick

If you are sick: You should wear a facemask when you are around other people (e.g., sharing a room or vehicle) and before you enter a healthcare provider's office. If you are not able to wear a facemask (for example, because it causes trouble breathing), then you should do your best to cover your coughs and sneezes, and people who are caring for you should wear a facemask if they enter your room.

If you are NOT sick: You do not need to wear a facemask unless you are caring for someone who is sick (and they are not able to wear a facemask). Facemasks may be in short supply and they should be saved for caregivers.

Clean and disinfect

Clean AND disinfect frequently touched surfaces daily. This includes tables, doorknobs, light switches, countertops,

handles, desks, phones, keyboards, toilets, faucets, and sinks. If surfaces are dirty, clean them: use detergent or soap and water prior to disinfection.

The above information is a limited glimpse of what the CDC has posted; if you go to their website, you will find much more than what is on this page.

After the web conference with the CDC, I went to the Liteblue page, logged in and watched Postmaster General Megan Brennan's video on COVID-19. The message is more comprehensive than what follows, and I encourage you to watch it if your supervisor has not yet shown it to you. But the following is worth repeating:

“The Postal Service is taking this health threat seriously, but we also intend to act calmly and consistently based upon the advice of medical and public health professionals,” Brennan says.

USPS is regularly sharing guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), including listing the actions that people can take to reduce the chances of getting the virus or spreading it.

These actions include washing your hands; avoiding touching your eyes, nose and mouth; and seeking medical care when you feel sick.

“This is something that I particularly want to emphasize — if you are sick, stay home and get well,” Brennan says.

The Postmaster General also says USPS is aware of one employee who has tested positive for COVID 19.

This individual works at the Seattle Network Distribution Center and is believed to have contracted the virus during overseas travel. The employee is recuperating at home, and the Postal Service is working closely with local health authorities, who have told USPS that the current risk to other employees in the same workplace is low.

“This is great news and reflects how the response process should work,” Brennan says.

Additionally, she says the Postal Service will continue to update employees often. She encourages them to pay attention to these communications and to follow CDC's guidance. “We want you to be safe and healthy,” Brennan says.

We wish to thank Postmaster General Brennan for encouraging employees to stay home and get well if they are sick. By doing so, she supports the recommendations of the CDC and does the right thing. Her video can be found on the “Safety and Health” page at nalc.org.

Keep an eye on each other.