



How to Prevent the Spread and Protect Our Community Against Coronavirus

By Dr. Carol J. Fox
March 9, 2020

Coronavirus — specifically the strain known as COVID-19 — has dominated our news cycles in recent days. We learn daily of increasing numbers of individuals who have been infected. **At this writing, there are confirmed cases in Pennsylvania, and we need to be prepared.**

The good news is that we have the best offense in each and every one of our homes, schools, and place of business: SOAP AND WATER. Washing your hands vigorously with soap and water is the best means of protecting ourselves and others against any infectious disease.

However, there is other important information that you should be aware of.

Excelsa Health has a number of response mechanisms in place. In addition to our standard infectious disease protocols, Excelsa Health is following Pennsylvania Department of Health (www.health.pa.gov) and Centers for Disease Control (www.cdc.gov) and Prevention guidelines and has instituted a number of measures to identify and screen patients with potential COVID-19.

For the past several years, we have been screening individuals for transmissible travel-related diseases who seek testing or treatment at our facilities. We have done this under the guidance of the CDC in order to help prevent the human-to-human spread of illnesses such as COVID-19 and others you may have heard of, such as Ebola and MERS. You may have experienced being asked the following questions:

- **In the last 21 days, have you traveled to any foreign countries or have you been exposed to anyone who has traveled and is under investigation by the state Health Department for illness? If yes, which locations?**
- **Do you have a fever or any lower respiratory illness (severe productive cough, shortness of breath, chest tightness, wheezing)?**

In the event an individual responds affirmatively to the above questions, our staff will contact our Infection Prevention and Control experts, who will provide further guidance. These experts are available 24 hours a day and seven days per week. This guidance is provided in direct collaboration with the state Health Department and the CDC.

We want to emphasize that Excelsa Health does not make the decision to test a patient for COVID-19. Testing is only performed at this time at the discretion of the state Health Department or the CDC.

Excelsa Health has an action plan in place should any patient meet criteria for COVID-19. Our providers are working as a team with internal, local, regional, and national resources to evaluate possible cases to ensure everyone's safety.

As updates from the state Health Department and CDC become available to us, we provide them to our physicians. Your providers will use this information to assist you in the event you contact them if you are ill and have had recent travel or have been exposed to someone who has.

If you have had recent travel and are experiencing symptoms, we encourage you to contact your provider via phone. Contacting your provider via phone, BEFORE YOU PRESENT to a facility to seek care can dramatically reduce the risk of exposure to others. Your provider can seek assistance from our Infection Control team to determine the best course of action for you.

However, should you be experiencing severe symptoms — feeling like you are unable to breathe — please call 911. If you are able, please notify them of your travel or exposure history when you call.

It's important for the public to be familiar with key facts about COVID-19. Similar to other respiratory illnesses like influenza, coronavirus generally spreads from an infected person to others via:

- Droplet by coughing and sneezing.
- Close personal contact (within about six feet), such as touching or shaking hands.
- Touching an object or surface with the virus on it, then touching your mouth, nose or eyes before washing your hand.
- There is currently no vaccine available that would prevent COVID-19 infection.
- Treatment for COVID-19 infection is supportive. There is no specific anti-viral treatment.

The CDC notes that the risk of death from COVID-19 is low at this time. Vulnerable populations in our community are at higher risk for death from influenza due to the prevalence of this infection. That is why it is so important to follow the following preventive actions to help prevent the spread of any respiratory disease:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Stay home from work or school when you are sick. Individuals who are ill with high body temperature (known as febrile illnesses) should be fever-free for 24 hours without the use of fever medicines before resuming regular activities or attending work/school. We must each monitor ourselves in order to protect those around us from illness.
- If you are elderly or have chronic conditions that either predispose you to infectious diseases or could result in more severe illness during an infection, you should limit your exposure to large gatherings where individuals with illness may be present.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.
- The CDC does not recommend that people who are well wear a facemask to protect themselves from respiratory diseases, including COVID-19.
- Facemasks should be used by people who show symptoms of COVID-19 to help prevent the spread of the disease to others.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before eating and after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing. It's always important to wash your hands after going to the bathroom — and especially important now.
- 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.

We will continue to update information on our public website as new information is available from the state Health Department and the CDC with whom we work closely on a daily basis. We want to ensure that our community has quick and easy access to new information and updates as it evolves.

It is the mission of Excelsa Health to improve the health and well-being of every life we touch. Our physicians, nurses, and staff are committed to providing you, our community, with the best care possible.

Dr. Carol J. Fox, a family physician and Greensburg resident, is senior vice president and chief medical officer of Excelsa Health.