

How to Cope with Anxiety and Health Concerns Related to Coronavirus (COVID-19): A Guide for Patients with Heart Disease and Their Families

For many people, the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) may be stressful. Fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and can cause strong emotions in adults and children. It's important to be safe, careful and informed during this time – and to keep your health in mind.

What is Coronavirus (COVID-19)?

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person, which has affected people in many countries. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the following symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure: fever, cough, and shortness of breath. For most people—80% of cases—the illness is mild. However, the virus can cause severe illness and death.

Patients with Heart Conditions

Patients with heart disease are not at higher risk for getting coronavirus (COVID-19), but if they do get it there is a higher chance to suffer serious complications. Therefore, if you or your loved one has a heart condition, you should take extra care to protect yourself during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Here are some ways to stay healthy:

- The best way to protect yourself against coronavirus (COVID-19) is by frequently cleaning your hands, keeping surfaces clean and avoiding travel to areas with outbreaks.
- If you experience symptoms, such as fever, cough, or shortness of breath, call your health care professional.
- Treatment for virus infections, including coronavirus (COVID-19), typically involves rest and staying hydrated. If you have heart failure, excess fluid in your body may be a concern. So, ask your healthcare professional about extra monitoring you might need.
- Also, if you are taking medicine for a health condition, including heart disease or diabetes, problems may occur if you skip a dose or stop it altogether. Don't change your medications or treatment without first talking to your health care professional.
- For more information about coronavirus (COVID-19) and the heart go to the American Heart Association's website: <https://www.heart.org/en/about-us/coronavirus-covid-19-resources>

Psychological Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19)

It is natural to feel stress, anxiety, sadness and worry during and after a disaster. Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. Infectious disease outbreaks are one of the most distressing forms of disaster to deal with psychologically because of the uncertainty they cause. With other stressful life events (e.g., hurricanes) we know for sure whether we've been personally impacted. There is also a clear endpoint and we can be confident that the worst is over once the event ends. But disease outbreaks don't have that kind of clear time boundary. For some people, this creates an ongoing state of feeling at risk, which is not the kind of acute stressor our "fight or flight"

system was designed to deal with over an extended period of time. This can take a real toll on our bodies and minds, so it's essential to recognize and address our stress to prevent it from becoming overwhelming.

How you respond to the current health crisis can depend on your background, the things that make you different from other people, and the community you live in.

People who may respond more strongly to the stress of an infectious disease outbreak include:

- Older people and people with chronic diseases who are at higher risk for coronavirus (COVID-19)
- Children and teens
- People who struggle with general worry, health anxiety and other mental health issues, including problems with substance use

Look out for these common signs and symptoms of stress:

- Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones
- Worsening of chronic health problems
- Feelings of numbness, disbelief, anxiety or fear
- Changes in appetite, energy, and activity levels
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty sleeping or upsetting thoughts and images
- Physical reactions, such as headaches, body pains, stomach problems, and skin rashes
- Feeling more anger, irritability or short-tempered
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs
- Withdrawing from social interactions that are considered safe by health officials (e.g., phone calls, conversations with others at a safe distance)

Coping with stress can make you, the people you care about, and your community stronger. *If you experience these feelings or behaviors for several days in a row and are unable to carry out normal responsibilities because of them, seek professional help.*

With the evolving impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) in communities across the country, many people, including those with heart disease, are facing new challenges keeping them from getting to the office, school, grocery store or gym.

Here is a list of tips to maintain your health and manage anxiety about coronavirus (COVID-19) (links to informational websites are underlined/colored blue):

- 1. Educate yourself - Get the facts.** Learn about the virus and how it may impact your health and the health of your family. Understanding these issues and the strategies your community and healthcare are taking to minimize the spread of the virus will help to reduce your anxiety and help you cope more effectively. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a [webpage dedicated to information on the coronavirus outbreak](#). You may also find useful, reputable information from local or state public health agencies or even your family physician. Be aware that there may be rumors

during a crisis, especially on social media. Always check your sources and turn to reliable sources of information like your local government authorities.

2. **Information control.** Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media. Hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can be upsetting.
3. **Keep things in perspective.** Take a deep breath and remind yourself that most people who contract coronavirus (COVID-19) will only experience mild symptoms. Work is being done to help people who may be more vulnerable to coronavirus (COVID-19), such as senior citizens and those with underlying health conditions.
4. **Take care of your body.** Take deep breaths, stretch, or meditate. Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep, and avoid alcohol and drugs.
5. **Stay active at home!** You can get up and move just about anytime, anywhere to be more physically active and stay healthy. Every time you stand up and do something, you're taking a step in the right direction. Finding ways to be more active around the house sets a good example for kids and can help you stay on top of housework. You can combine exercise with other activities, like watching TV, cleaning or cooking.
 - **Make active chore cards.** Cleaning up after dinner, walking the dog, taking the trash out, folding laundry and unloading the dishwasher are all good ways to get your family up off the couch – and get the chores done.
 - **Clear some space, put on some music, and take a dance break!** It can re-energize a study session, lazy Sunday or game night.
 - **Put the screens on hold.** Instead of heading right for the TV or game console after dinner, make that family activity time. Take a walk, practice a sport, or play a game of hide-and-seek.
 - **Play actively with pets.** Throw a ball or stick for the dog to fetch. Lead the cat on a string chase around the house.
 - **Include active games** in family game night, like Twister, charades and hide-and-seek.
 - **Keep a list of kid-friendly activities handy** for when you hear “I’m bored.”
 - **Choose toys for your kids that encourage physical activity**, such as balls, skateboards, hula hoops and jump ropes.
 - **Keep exercise equipment out** where it can easily be used for a quick workout.
6. **Plan activities to unwind or do some other activities you enjoy.** Try to do enjoyable activities and return to normal life as much as possible. Try to keep up with regular routines.
7. **Connect with others.** Maintaining social networks can foster a sense of normality and provide valuable outlets for sharing feelings and relieving stress. Connect with others virus by talking on the phone, texting or chatting with family and friends. Share useful information you find on government websites with your friends and family. It will help them deal with their own anxiety.

- 8. Seek help from experts when needed.** If you, or someone you care about, are feeling overwhelmed with emotions like anxiety, intense worry, nervousness, sadness, or depression call your healthcare provider and ask to speak with a trained and experienced counselor or mental health professional. Psychologists and other appropriate mental health providers can help people deal with extreme stress.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

CDC website:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html>

For patients diagnosed with cardiovascular disease

https://www.cardiosmart.org/News-and-Events/2020/03/Heart-Patients-Warned-of-Risks-from-Coronavirus?_ga=2.96629343.1155831591.1584365164-2128994245.1570103509

American Psychological Association:

<https://www.apa.org/practice/programs/dmhi/research-information/pandemics>

For parents

Children and teens react, in part, on what they see from the adults around them. When parents and caregivers deal with the coronavirus (COVID-19) calmly and confidently, they can provide the best support for their children. Parents can be more reassuring to others around them, especially children, if they are better prepared.

Not all children and teens respond to stress in the same way. Some common changes to watch for include:

- Excessive crying or irritation in younger children
- Returning to behaviors they have outgrown (for example, toileting accidents or bedwetting)
- Excessive worry or sadness
- Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits
- Irritability and “acting out” behaviors in teens
- Poor school performance or avoiding school
- Difficulty with attention and concentration
- Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past
- Unexplained headaches or body pain
- Use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs

There are many things you can do to support your child

- Take time to talk with your child or teen about the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. Answer questions and [share facts](#) about coronavirus (COVID-19) in a way that your child or teen can understand.
- Reassure your child or teen that they are safe. Let them know it is ok if they feel upset. Share with them how you deal with your own stress so that they can learn how to cope from you.

- Limit your family’s exposure to news coverage of the event, including social media. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened about something they do not understand.
- Try to keep up with regular routines. If schools are closed, create a schedule for learning activities and relaxing or fun activities.
- Be a role model. Take breaks, get plenty of sleep, exercise, and eat well. Connect with your friends and family members.

For people who have been released from quarantine

Being separated from others if a healthcare provider thinks you may have been exposed to coronavirus (COVID-19) can be stressful, even if you do not get sick. Everyone feels differently after coming out of quarantine. Some feelings include:

- Mixed emotions, including relief after quarantine
- Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones
- Stress from the experience of monitoring yourself or being monitored by others for signs and symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19)
- Sadness, anger, or frustration because friends or loved ones have unfounded fears of contracting the disease from contact with you, even though you have been determined not to be contagious
- Guilt about not being able to perform normal work or parenting duties during quarantine
- Other emotional or mental health changes
- Children may also feel upset or have other strong emotions if they, or someone they know, has been released from quarantine. [You can help your child cope.](#)

For Everyone

- [Coping with a Disaster or Traumatic Event](#)

For Communities

- [Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health during an Infectious Disease](#)

For Families and Children

- [Helping Children Cope with Emergencies](#)
- [Coping After a Disaster](#)– A Ready Wrigley activity book for children age 3-10

References for this document:

American College of Cardiology's COVID-19 Hub at www.ACC.org/COVID19

American Heart Association News - <https://www.heart.org/en/news/2020/02/27/what-heart-patients-should-know-about-coronavirus>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) - <https://www.cdc.gov/>

World Health Organization <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>