Social distancing:
It's not about you, it's about us

Social distancing, quarantines and isolation are being used to contain the coronavirus pandemic and limit its impact on public health
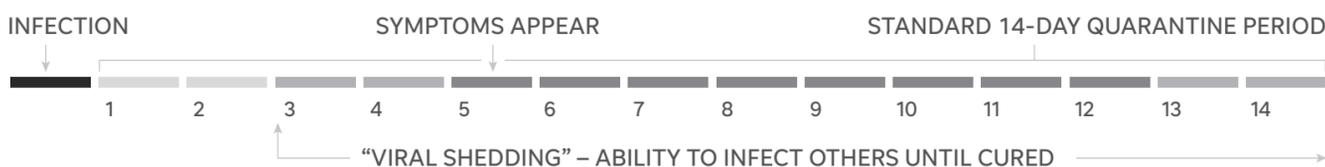
Jim Sergent, Janet Loehrke, George Petras and Veronica Bravo, USA TODAY

Wash your hands and keep your distance.

Those are two of the best tools we have right now to slow the spread of coronavirus around the U.S., according to federal health officials.

Washing your hands has long been recommended to combat illnesses like the seasonal flu, but keeping your distance, or social distancing, is a new tactic that schools, sports teams and government officials fully embraced this week with unprecedented cancellations.

It's not so much about keeping you healthy as it is about minimizing the number of Americans infected at the same time.

The strategy has arisen largely from the coronavirus's long incubation period: the time between exposure to infection and when infection symptoms appear. People start to feel sick five to 12 days after they've been infected, according to a study issued by Johns Hopkins University on March 9. However, it's still not clear when infected people can infect others.

Preliminary research suggests those with the virus can unknowingly infect others before symptoms appear, some as soon as two days after infection. Patients are able to spread the infection until they recover.

Coronavirus incubation: Symptoms appear in 5-12 days

INFECTION   SYMPTOMS APPEAR   STANDARD 14-DAY QUARANTINE PERIOD

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14

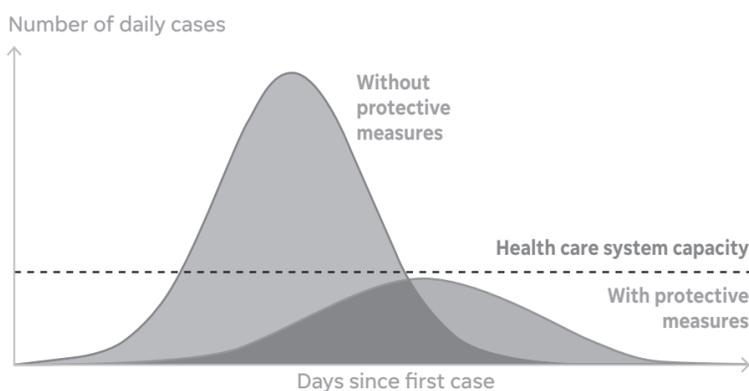"VIRAL SHEDDING" – ABILITY TO INFECT OTHERS UNTIL CURED

Curving the spread of the virus

While coronavirus transmission methods are still being analyzed, the CDC says it's likely spread from person to person by water droplets discharged by sneezes or coughs of an infected person.

Those droplets can be inhaled or even land in the mouths or noses of those nearby. Personal contact is usually between two people 6 feet apart or less. The virus can also live for hours or days on hard surfaces like desks or doorknobs.

That's why using social distancing to avoid crowds is recommended.

Social distancing is different from being quarantined or isolated. While the latter two contain the spread, social distancing is a tool of intervention and mitigation, a way of reducing the viral impact on society by limited personal contact.

It doesn't eliminate the virus but makes it easier to deal with. Social distancing reduces the number of infections and spreads them out over a longer period of time. The results are fewer infections and fewer deaths.

Flattening the curve

Mitigation efforts can help reduce the number of daily coronavirus cases and ease pressure on the health care system.

Number of daily cases

Without protective measures

Health care system capacity

With protective measures

Days since first case

Isolating

Isolating the sick from the healthy is part of human history, starting in the 14th century when the practice of quarantine began in Europe. With the present-day coronavirus, isolation is used to hospitalize and treat infected people. Isolation lasts until the patient recovers.

Social distancing

A number of schools have already canceled classes in favor of online instruction. Cities have blocked events and limited public gatherings, and businesses are encouraging employees to work from home. Sports events have been canceled. Some churches have halted worship services.

Social distancing is designed to contain the highly contagious coronavirus. Spreading infection is known as "virus shedding," but time frames differ among diseases.

Quarantine

Quarantine is separation for those who are without symptoms but are suspected of being infected, especially if returning from an infected region. They are placed in a restricted space, their movements are limited, and they are monitored to determine whether they are sick.

Social distancing includes keeping adequate space between you and others, at work and elsewhere. It's meant to protect not only you, but the greater public as well, by eliminating transmission routes of the virus.

People are quarantined until it's certain they're not infected. The standard quarantine period is 14 days.

Both quarantine and isolation are strict measures of bottling up the virus, keeping it in a confined space.