

COVID-19: What You Might Need If You're Quarantined at Home

Despite what you might see others doing, there's no need to hoard supplies for an extended stay at home

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COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus that first emerged in China, is now spreading in certain communities in the U.S.

Some people are trying to limit their contact with crowds by spending more time at home. And as public health officials scramble to limit the spread of the virus, many Americans who have been exposed to COVID-19 have been asked to quarantine themselves at home for 14 days. Eventually, whole communities may be under similar restrictions, which is what happened in parts of Italy and China.

“We ask for people’s patience and understanding, and most importantly their cooperation,” Nancy Messonnier, M.D., director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), said in a recent press briefing. “Right now, individual actions can have an important impact on how this situation plays out. You may need to take a break from your normal daily routine.”

That sort of break isn't all bad, says Emily He, a writer who lives in Cambridge, Mass., but was in China visiting family for Chinese New Year and has been unable to travel far from her mother’s apartment since Jan. 25. “Think about things you've been meaning to catch up on, and make a list,” He suggests.

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But how exactly should you prepare for the possibility of a home quarantine? News reports show some Americans hoarding all manner of supplies, including mostly unnecessary ones like masks and bottled water.

“This isn’t the apocalypse,” says Jason Kindrachuk, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the department of medical microbiology at the University of Manitoba and an emerging virus specialist. “We need to be rational in our decisions, understanding that, for example, we need enough supplies to carry us through without making unnecessary trips to the store, but not so much that we’re potentially affecting other people’s ability to prepare as well.”

In that spirit, we set out to compile a list of what you may need—and what you don’t.

What You Need: The Basics

Before going shopping, you need an action plan. Start by talking through what everyone in your household—especially those at high risk because of medical conditions or age—will do and need in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak in your community.

Put together an emergency contact list and learn about emergency procedures at your schools, childcare facilities, and places of work. And choose a room in your home where, if necessary, you’d be able to isolate a sick household member.

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Next, make sure you have adequate supplies of certain items. What's adequate? "My colleagues and I are recommending two weeks' worth of supplies like food and household goods," says Kindrachuk.

Hand cleanser: Experts, including those at the CDC, say handwashing is our primary line of defense—so it's worth making sure you have plenty of soap.

Each member of your household should be washing his or her hands many times a day, so expect to go through a lot. "Soap and water are the gold standard," says Kindrachuk. Any liquid or bar soap is appropriate. Antibacterial soaps aren't necessary, because they don't kill viruses.

Though he says soap and water is the best approach, Kindrachuk acknowledges the importance of hand sanitizer. "It's a quick fix," he says. "You can't always wash your hands every time you touch something." Make sure it consists of at least 60 percent alcohol.

Cleaning products: Get in the habit of routinely cleaning any household surfaces that you frequently come into contact with. The CDC's list includes countertops, faucets, door knobs, drawer pulls, light switches, computer keyboards, tablets, remote controls, toilets, telephones, and the handles of implements like brooms, mops, and pots and pans. Daniel Barnett, M.D., M.P.H., an associate professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, suggests maintaining a list of these areas and a cleaning schedule so you don't forget.

The coronavirus is effectively destroyed by almost any household cleaner or simple soap and water, Kindrachuk says.

But if you want to be extra careful, he suggests using a homemade solution of nine parts water to one part bleach, or buying one of the disinfectant products on [this list](#) referenced by the CDC.

Don't forget that you'll also need plenty of paper goods: paper towels, tissues, and toilet paper, at a minimum. Consider picking up extra garbage bags, too, so you can safely toss contaminated tissues and paper towels.

Food: Barnett recommends buying a couple of weeks' worth of long-lasting staples like rice, beans, pasta, canned vegetables, and shelf-stable milk—again, not because such things are likely to become widely unavailable but to minimize the need to make extra trips to the market. Also consider stocking up on (or making a big vat of) [chicken broth](#); there's actually some [scientific evidence](#) backing up its reputation for relieving coughs. And make sure you have enough food for your pets, too.

Over-the-counter medicine: As with the seasonal flu, chief symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, body aches, and coughing, Barnett says. OTC meds like acetaminophen (Tylenol and generic) and ibuprofen (Advil and generic) can help treat fevers and aches.

Prescription drugs: During an early March conference call, Tom Frieden, M.D., M.P.H., a former head of the CDC, recommended that people try to secure a three-month supply of important medications. Many “pharmaceutical ingredients come from China,” he said. “We don't know how disrupted that supply chain will be.” Ask your doctor for a 90-day prescription and consider getting it delivered through the mail, which can save money and eliminate regular trips to the

drugstore—where you might encounter people who are sick. Before you stock up, be sure to also ask your insurer if your plan offers coverage for an “extended-day supply.”

Laundry detergent: This is a household basic, but it's also especially important if you're averse to single-use paper and plastic goods and plan to use additional towels and linens to maintain sanitary conditions. Any brand will do, Kindrachuk says.

Thermometer: If you already have one at home, there's no need to buy a new one, Barnett says. But if you don't, consider getting one. It's a critical tool for monitoring potential illness.

What You Might Want: The Extras

Robust WiFi: As the coronavirus outbreak spreads in the U.S., a growing number of people who can work from home will probably do so. Others will use the at-home time to catch up on binge-worthy TV. The result in many households could easily be a WiFi logjam if you don't have a robust system in place. Consider taking steps to boost your signal or upgrading to a mesh router system, which will help spread the signal throughout even a sizable home.

Video conferencing services: If you're considering working from home, the transition may be smoother and more productive if you can communicate face-to-face, especially if your workplace isn't already set up for people to easily work from home. Talk to your manager about getting set up.

Entertainment: If you aren't already a subscriber to a streaming video service, now may be a good time to explore. CR has also reported on the wide variety of options that let you stream videos for free.

Another source of free entertainment is your local library. Long before she was quarantined in Kunming, China, in January, Emily He had signed up to access free e-books from her local public library back in the U.S. She spent some of her quarantine time plowing through a half-dozen titles.

You can also consider finding or purchasing some low-tech entertainment options—for both adults and kids—such as board games, books, and cards.

Exercise guides or equipment: In quarantine, maintaining an exercise routine can be vital to both mental and physical health.

“Staying active has been enormously helpful so I don't feel like my muscles are deteriorating and I don't feel like a sloth,” says He, who has been using a fitness app to guide her workouts.

People in coronavirus lockdown in some areas of China and Italy have been allowed to go outside their homes (but discouraged from congregating), while others have not. So having a strategy for indoor exercise is a smart idea.

A cardio-focused machine, like a treadmill or elliptical, would be an ideal component of such a routine, but it isn't necessary. (Here's a home workout you can do in front of the TV, for example.)

Strength training helps preserve muscle mass and maintain metabolism, and can be done effectively using little more than

your own bodyweight or small hand weights.

What You Don't Need

Face masks: Although images of people wearing disposable face masks have become ubiquitous, the CDC is unequivocal in saying that it “does not recommend that people who are well wear a face mask to protect themselves from respiratory diseases, including COVID-19.” The only people who need them are those who are sick or caring for others who are sick. (For more on why masks aren't necessary or effective when worn by the general public, see our previous article.)

Bottled water: Because natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes often disrupt or contaminate municipal water supplies, water is often the first thing that people stock up on when a potential crisis looms. But there's no reason to doubt the integrity of your water supply in the current context, says Barnett.