

Tips to prevent COVID-19

by Maureen Mayhew MD MPH CCFP CPCC



In the second week of March 2020, my partner cooked me a sumptuous birthday dinner. Two days later he was stressing over how to transform his courses into online formats. He had only two days to prepare.

That weekend, other people seemed to change too. Instead of stopping to chat, friendly neighbours slipped by, a skeptical look and a furrowed brow replacing the smiles they usually wore, and they shifted from foot to foot, as if nervously anticipating their exit.

At my trusted, corner store, the cashier and the person stocking the shelves wore masks, a new accessory for them. They drew back from customers with body language that spoke volumes. Korea and China were already in the throes of the pandemic and these store owners had heard terrible stories. Several meters from me, one owner spoke from behind a mask. "I'm scared. People must stay away, or we all get sick." What he meant was 'please stay at least two meters away from me'. He still wanted customers. This was his livelihood and he had no intention of closing the store.

In the next small grocery store, I saw the same fear. While walking in the street, people no longer smiled. Instead, they shifted away. One of my favourite shops, Les Amis du Fromage, had posted their clear message on a chalkboard. 'If you have cough, fever or runny nose, or if you have travelled in the last fourteen days, DO NOT enter. Please order by phone and we will deliver, or you can pick it up curbside.' I took a photo of it. They were taking charge.

Over the next two hours, I toured my favourite haunts. "I am a doctor who likes shopping at your store. If you give me your email address, I will send you a few ideas of how you can make shopping safe for you and your customers." No one refused.

Upon arriving home, I typed several ideas into an email and included the photograph of the sign which I sent to the shop owners. Some responded immediately, saying that they would implement my suggestions. The tone of their notes intimated thanks for a little help amid the confusion. When I shared the experience with a few friends, they sounded intrigued which spurred my curiosity. Might my small idea be useful to a larger audience? I contacted British Columbia's Provincial Medical Health Officer. If she thought they were good enough, perhaps she would distribute them more widely. About two weeks later, Dr. Bonnie Henry's team had modified and improved what I'd done, transforming it into '[COVID-19 guidance to Retail Food and Grocery Stores](#)'.

While that communication developed, a fellow public health colleague, Dr. Angeli Rawat, and I continued to review literature about COVID-19. Feeling disturbed by the wide range of misinformation that people seemed to follow, we started researching tips to help people understand what they could do to stay safe during the pandemic. We chose topics not answered by existing guidance documents, where confusion was evident such as the question about whether to wash all grocery packages or leave your newly purchased items outside for 48 hours. Two medical students, Paige Dean and Tori Spangehl, joined our team. Through discussions with colleagues, friends, family and Facebook groups, we clarified additional scenarios that seemed problematic and we tested our tips. As of today, we have created eight, evidence-informed tip sheets with one-page infographics:

1. Tips for Shopping During COVID-19
2. Practical Tips for People Living in Apartments and Condominiums
3. Practical, Evidence-Informed Tips About Food
4. Keeping Your Home Safe When None of You are Sick
5. Practical Tips for Ride Sharing
6. Communication and Physical Distance
7. Practical Tips for Safety in Outdoor Activities
8. Tips for Parenting
9. Practical Tips to Foster Mental Well-Being

Since April 10, 2020, a growing number of people from more than a dozen countries have viewed these documents. Their feedback has been tremendous. Our plan is to continue building tip sheets as long as gaps can be filled by them. Our next one will suggest ways to foster mental health while physically distancing over the anticipated prolonged period until vaccines arrive. In the works is a 30-second video on dos and don'ts of wearing face coverings.

During such a life-altering event, everyone contributes what they can, often in new and creative ways. What additional topics would you like us to address?

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