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Is It Safe to Receive Packages During the Coronavirus Outbreak?

Infectious disease specialist answers questions about the coronavirus lifespan on surfaces, packages and in the air.

Quarantined at home and worried about the safety of your online deliveries? Infectious disease specialist and family physician at One Medical Natasha Bhuyan, MD, discusses how the novel coronavirus spreads and how long the virus can survive on surfaces. Dr. Bhuyan is a clinical assistant professor in Family, Community and Preventive Medicine at the University of Arizona College of Medicine – Phoenix.



How is the coronavirus transmitted?

Covid-19 spreads mostly through person-to-person contact within about a six-foot (1.8 meters) radius, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). People with Covid-19 spread viral particles in droplets through coughing and sneezing. The particles can land in the mouths or noses of those nearby.

It might be possible to catch the virus by touching a surface where the virus has recently landed and then touching one's mouth, nose or eyes, but CDC officials believe this method of transmission is less common. Some coronaviruses can live on surfaces for days, but not much is known about the virus' ability to survive on surfaces. Fortunately, ethanol, hydrogen-peroxide or bleach-based cleaners are effective at killing those coronaviruses that do survive on surfaces.

Unlike some extremely contagious pathogens, the virus is not thought to spread via smaller particles that can remain airborne for long periods of time. Measles, for example, can live in the air for hours after an infected person coughs or sneezes. There are conflicting studies about how long the coronavirus can remain in the air, but it is not classified as “airborne.”

Regarding the use of paper products, can Covid-19 be transmitted from those who handled the paper products, including newspapers and magazines, to those who bring these items into their households?

This strain of coronavirus tends to exist more on flat and hard surfaces as opposed to cloth or soft surfaces. Regarding items like boxes or paper, it's unlikely the virus would survive the real-life conditions of those surfaces. For example, delivery boxes or newspapers being in sunlight would create an environment that the virus is less likely to survive.

Is there anything people who receive the products can do to protect themselves?

People should take general precautions during this time, including washing their hands thoroughly and frequently for 20 seconds, and avoid touching their face. An additional precaution is to disinfect the package a product comes in, especially if it's a hard and flat surface.

How long can Covid-19 live on a surface?

It depends on the surface. It's believed that coronavirus can live on hard surfaces for two days, which is why it's important to wipe down frequently touched hard surfaces with disinfectants. This includes countertops, light switches and doorknobs. A study found that the virus can only live on copper for a few hours. It may live on soft surfaces for a few hours.

Should I avoid purchasing products from areas with a large number of Covid-19 cases?

It is unlikely to have coronavirus transmission from delivery boxes that originate from a place with a large number of Covid-19 cases. The virus would not likely survive the delivery journey.