

COVID-19 and Our Air Force Family

Many areas across the United States are experiencing community transmission of COVID-19 (2019 coronavirus disease). Secretary Esper, GEN Milley, and Chief Master Sgt. Colón-Lopez held a virtual global town hall on March 24, 2020 to discuss DoD's COVID-19 response. Secretary Esper emphasized three priorities: protecting our people, safeguarding our national mission capabilities, and supporting the government effort to protect the American people. If you missed it or weren't able to view the live event, watch the recording here: <https://www.dvidshub.net/video/744094/top-dod-officials-hold-virtual-town-hall-meeting>. As your Command Surgeon in AETC and a pediatrician, I want to share my recommendations to our families and Airmen. Our Air Force is continuing the mission, and we can do this at the same time as protecting you. It is understandable that Airmen and their families may feel anxious. A good way to counter concerns about COVID-19 is to ensure you have the facts about this illness, as well as understand ways to protect you and your family from COVID-19.

The best source for information of COVID-19 and how to stay healthy comes from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://www.cdc.gov>). While social media and other online sources are overflowing with the latest "updates", these sources should not be your go-to.

Basic facts on COVID-19:

- 1) The virus that causes COVID-19 is mainly spread from one person to another through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These small respiratory droplets travel less than 3 to 6 feet.
- 2) Respiratory droplets fall out of the air fairly quickly and deposit on surfaces. It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads.
- 3) Older adults (aged 65 years and older) and people of any age who have serious underlying medical conditions may be at higher risk for more serious complications from COVID-19. High-risk conditions include chronic heart and lung diseases, immune compromised including cancer treatment, poorly controlled diabetes, and pregnant women. Young pediatric patients may still get infected; however, the course of illness currently demonstrated is less severe with minimal complications and lower hospitalizations.
- 4) Symptoms of COVID-19 include fever, cough, and shortness of breath.

Steps to protect yourself and your family:

- 1) Social distancing means keeping 3 to 6 feet between yourself and other people. This is especially important for those with underlying medical conditions who are at higher risk of getting very sick.
- 2) Avoid touching high-touch surfaces in public places - elevator buttons, door handles, handrails, handshaking with people, etc. Use a tissue or your sleeve to cover your hand or finger if you must touch something.
- 3) Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds especially after you have been in a public place. If soap and water are not readily available, use hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Also, avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- 4) Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces daily - at your workplace and your home. This includes tables, doorknobs, light switches, countertops, handles, desks, phones, keyboards, toilets, faucets, and sinks.

COVID-19 and Our Air Force Family

5) When mission permits stay home. If you or our family need to travel, minimize your travel to driving to and from work, attending to necessities (groceries, pharmacy, gas), and seeking medical care. If military members are worried about bringing the virus home, consider changing uniform and showering immediately upon arrival home.

6) Utilize online ordering and store delivery to avoid crowded stores. When travel to a store is unavoidable, here are some tips: plan travel at off-peak times and don't go daily; bring your own cleaning supplies for cleaning store cart; have a plan to get in and quickly check-out; and practice social distancing. After being in a public space in which others have not brushed up against you, it is not necessary to wash clothes or shower afterwards. Instead, use hand sanitizer once back to your car. Wash hands immediately upon arriving back home. Then carry in what you purchased and put items away. Finally, wipe down countertops where packages were placed, and once again wash your hands.

7) When getting food from a restaurant, utilize the drive-thru or to-go pick up. When delivery is available, use credit card payment (to include tip), and arrange for no-contact food drop-off.

If you do get sick:

1) Stay home, minimize your contact with others in your household, and call ahead before visiting your healthcare provider. A good number to engage is the Nurse Advise Line: 1-800-TRICARE.

2) Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw used tissues in a lined trash can. Then immediately wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

3) Do not share dishes, drinking glasses, cups, eating utensils, towels, or bedding with other people in your home. After using these items, wash them thoroughly with soap and water or put in the dishwasher.

4) Clean high-touch surfaces in your isolation area ("sick room" and bathroom) every day; let a caregiver clean and disinfect high-touch surfaces in other areas of the home.

5) Seek medical care right away if your illness is worsening (for example, if you have difficulty breathing). Before going to the doctor's office or emergency room, call ahead and tell them your symptoms. They will tell you what to do.

6) This can be a demanding time. Sometimes the stress is more than we can handle; please remember there is always help available to cope with mental resiliency. The Military OneSource call center (1-800-342-9647) remains available 24/7/365 for personalized support. If you are feeling stressed, counseling services remain available by phone, video and online. To schedule an appointment, call (1-800-342-9647) or live chat (<https://livechat.militaryonesourceconnect.org/chat>) through the Military OneSource website (<https://www.militaryonesource.mil>).

Finally, AETC Commanders have implemented mitigating measures to protect our staff and installations. Some recommendations include screening for disease, training within small groups, altering work schedules, and restriction of movement. These are just a few examples to support protecting our work force and your families. Together we will get through this.



GIANNA ZEH, Col, USAF
AETC, Command Surgeon