Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Respiratory Illnesses

Respiratory Illnesses Home

Preventing Spread of Respiratory Viruses When You're Sick

What to know

- Taking steps to prevent the spread of respiratory viruses when you are sick is a core prevention strategy to lower risk from respiratory viruses.
- Core prevention strategies are important steps you can take to protect yourself and others from respiratory viruses.

Recommendation

When you may have a respiratory virus...

Stay home and away from others (including people you live with who are not sick) if you have respiratory virus symptoms that aren't better explained by another cause. These symptoms can include fever, chills, fatigue, cough, runny nose, and headache, among others.*

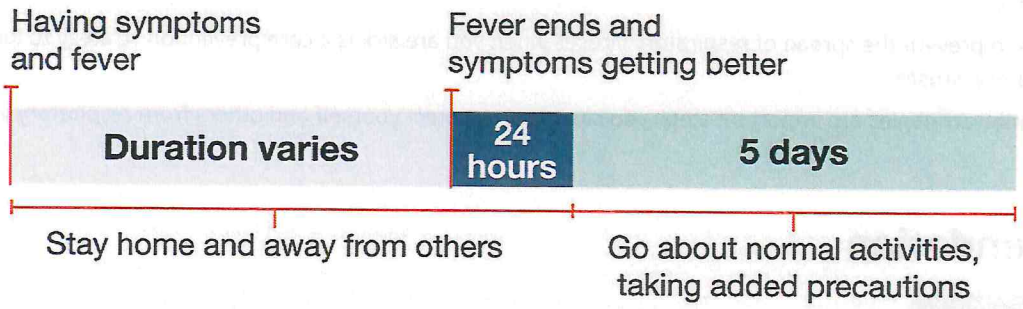
- You can go back to your normal activities when, for at least 24 hours, both are true:
  - Your symptoms are getting better overall, **and**
  - You have not had a fever (and are not using fever-reducing medication).

- When you go back to your normal activities, take added precaution over the next 5 days, such as taking additional steps for cleaner air, hygiene, masks, physical distancing, and/or testing when you will be around other people indoors.
  - Keep in mind that you may still be able to spread the virus that made you sick, even if you are feeling better. You are likely to be less contagious at this time, depending on factors like how long you were sick or how sick you were.
  - If you develop a fever or you start to feel worse after you have gone back to normal activities, stay home and away from others again until, for at least 24 hours, both are true: your symptoms are improving overall, and you have not had a fever (and are not using fever-reducing medication). Then take added precaution for the next 5 days.

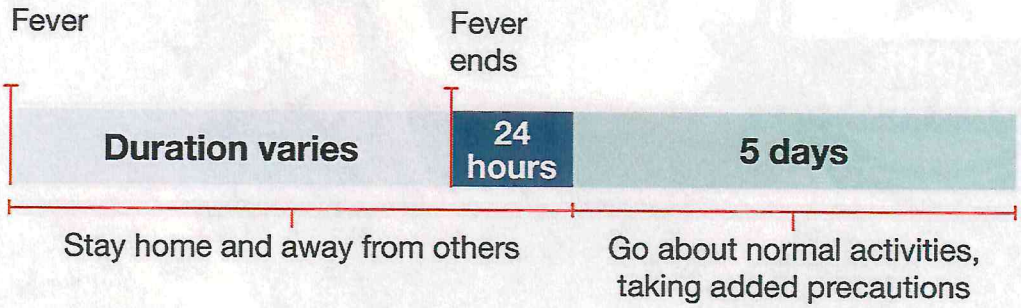
Examples

For illustrative purposes, not to scale

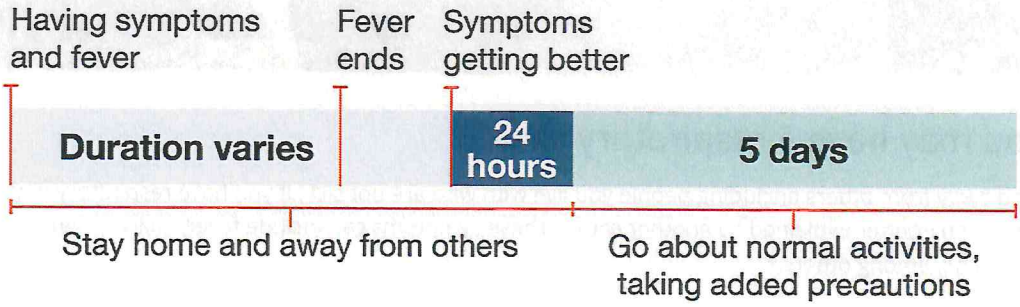
Example 1: Person with fever and symptoms.



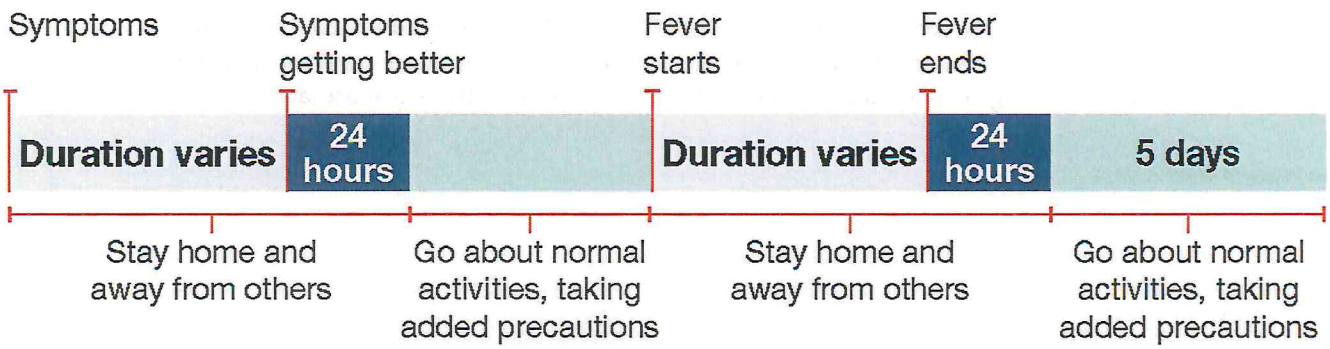
Example 2: Person with fever but no other symptoms.



Example 3: Person with fever and other symptoms, fever ends but other symptoms take longer to improve.



Example 4: Person gets better and then gets a fever.



If you never had symptoms but tested positive for a respiratory virus

You may be contagious. For the next 5 days: take added precaution, such as taking additional steps for cleaner air, hygiene, masks, physical distancing, and/or testing when you will be around other people indoors. This is especially important to protect people with factors that increase their risk of severe illness from respiratory viruses.

How it works

When you have a respiratory virus infection, you can spread it to others. How long someone can spread the virus depends on different factors, including how sick they are (severity) and how long their illness lasts (duration). This is not the same for everyone.

When, for at least 24 hours, your symptoms are getting better overall and you have not had a fever (and are not using fever-reducing medication), you are typically less contagious, but it still takes more time for your body to fully get rid of the virus. During this time, you may still be able to spread the virus to others. Taking precautions for the next 5 days can help reduce this risk. After this 5-day period, you are typically much less likely to be contagious. However, some people, especially people with weakened immune systems, can continue to spread the virus for a longer period of time. For COVID-19, taking an antigen test can help you know how likely you are to spread the virus. A positive test tends to mean it is more likely that you can spread the virus to others.

Steps you can take

Individuals can

- Consider using additional prevention tools, such as taking steps for cleaner air, being diligent about hygiene, and using masks when you're home sick to protect others in your home. This can be especially helpful if you do not have space at home to stay entirely away from others.
- Monitor your symptoms. If you have an emergency warning sign (like trouble breathing or chest pain), seek emergency medical care immediately.

Organizations can

- Advise people to stay home if they are sick.
- Provide employees with paid time off and develop flexible leave and telework policies to support workers to stay home if sick or to care for sick family members.
- Adopt flexible cancellation or refund policies for customers who are sick.

*Symptoms may include but are not limited to chest discomfort, chills, cough, decrease in appetite, diarrhea, fatigue (tiredness), fever or feeling feverish, headache, muscle or body aches, new loss of taste or smell, runny or stuffy nose, sneezing, sore throat, vomiting, weakness, wheezing.

Note

CDC offers separate, specific guidance for healthcare settings (COVID-19, flu, and general infection prevention and control). Federal civil rights laws may require reasonable modifications or reasonable accommodations in various circumstances. Nothing in this guidance is intended to detract from or supersede those laws.

Last Reviewed: March 1, 2024