



Coronavirus and Your Eyes

What is coronavirus?

There are many types of viruses called coronaviruses, and some of them can make you sick. The new type we are hearing about now as part of this pandemic is called COVID-19. This virus causes mild to severe respiratory illness.

People who are exposed to coronavirus may show symptoms anywhere from two to 14 days later. Those symptoms can include fever, cough and shortness of breath. Some people can develop pneumonia, and become seriously ill or die from coronavirus complications.

How can coronavirus affect your eyes?

The first thing to understand is that coronavirus can spread through the eyes—just as it does through the mouth or nose.

When someone who has coronavirus coughs or talks, virus particles can spray from their mouth or nose into your face. You are likely to breathe these tiny droplets in through your mouth or nose. But the droplets can also enter your body through your eyes.

People who have coronavirus can also spread the disease through their tears. Touching tears or a surface where tears have landed is another way someone can become infected.

You can also become infected by touching your eyes after touching something that has the virus on it.

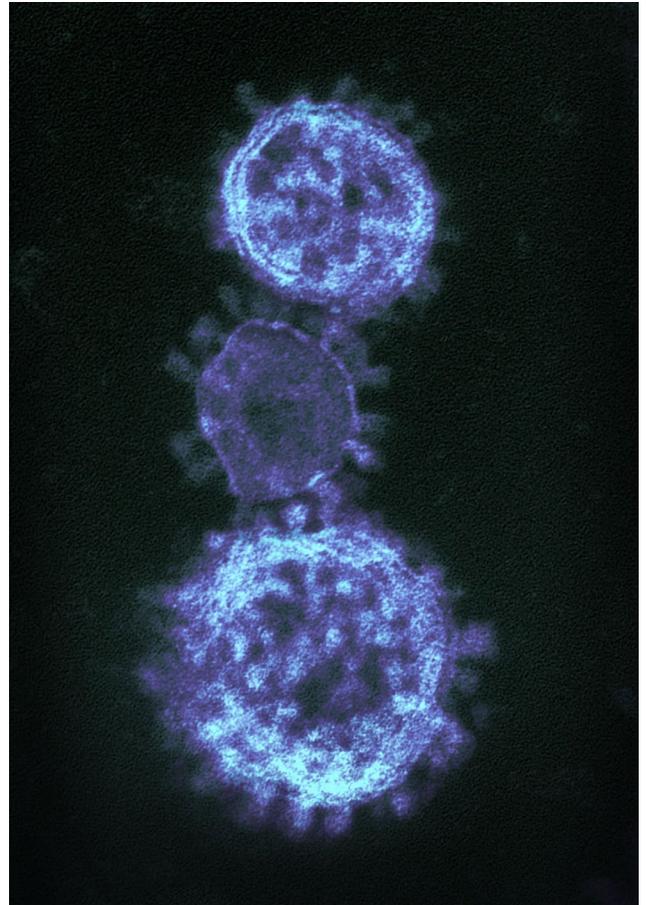


Photo credit: National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID).

Coronavirus may cause a pink eye infection (conjunctivitis), but this is rare. If you have pink eye, don't panic. Simply call your ophthalmologist to let them know and follow their instructions for care. Keep in mind that whether pink eye is caused by a virus or bacteria, it can spread if someone touches that sticky or runny discharge from the eyes.

Caring for your eyes during the COVID-19 outbreak

Here are ways your ophthalmologist will work to protect patient health during the coronavirus pandemic.

1. Expect changes to your routine eye exam and procedures.

Ophthalmologists sit face-to-face with many patients daily. But rest assured your ophthalmologist follows very strict cleaning and disinfection guidelines. Here are some other things you may notice:

- The clinic may ask you to wait outside, or in your car, instead of in the normal waiting room. This is to protect you, the other patients and the office staff from possible virus exposure in crowded waiting areas.
- Non-emergency surgeries and procedures may be postponed. If coronavirus is present in your community, even minor eye procedures could expose you or your doctor to the virus. Also, doctors will need to save the surgical supplies, including masks and face shields, for emergency situations.
- Your eye doctor may use a special plastic breath shield on the slit lamp machine they use to look into your eyes. Your ophthalmologist may also wear a mask with a plastic shield over their eyes.
- Your doctor may wait until after your slit-lamp eye exam to talk with you or answer questions.

2. Eye doctors recommend the following precautions:

- If you have a cough or a fever, you must call your doctor's office ahead of time and let them know. If your visit is not an emergency, you may need to stay home.
- If you arrive sick, your doctor may ask you to wear a protective covering or mask, and to wait in a special room away from other patients.
- If you need to cough or sneeze during your exam, move back from the microscope. Bury your face in the crook of your arm or cover your face with a tissue. Wash your hands with soap and water right away.

Guarding your eyes — as well as your hands and mouth — can slow the spread of coronavirus. Here are some ways to you can keep your eyes safe and healthy during this coronavirus outbreak.

1. If you wear contact lenses, try switching to glasses for a while.

Contact lens wearers touch their eyes more than the average person. Consider wearing glasses more often, especially if you tend to touch your eyes a lot when your contacts are in. Substituting glasses for lenses can reduce eye irritation, and they may be a barrier that reminds you not to touch your eye. If you must wear contacts, be sure to clean and disinfect them exactly as your eye doctor recommends.

2. Wearing glasses may add a layer of protection.

Corrective lenses or sunglasses can shield your eyes from infected respiratory droplets. But keep in mind that they don't provide 100% security. The virus can still reach your eyes from the open

sides, tops and bottoms of your glasses. For better protection, you must use safety goggles if you're caring for a sick patient or potentially exposed person.

3. Stock up on eye medicine prescriptions if you can.

If your insurance allows you to get more than one month of necessary eye medicine (like glaucoma drops), you should. Some insurers will approve a 3-month supply of medication in times of natural disaster. Ask your pharmacist or ophthalmologist for help if you have trouble getting approval from your insurance company. As always, request a refill as soon as you are due. Don't wait until the last minute to contact your pharmacy.

4. Avoid rubbing your eyes.

It can be hard to break this natural habit, but doing so will lower your risk of infection. If you feel an urge to itch or rub your eye or even to adjust your glasses, use a tissue instead of your fingers. Dry eyes can lead to more rubbing, so consider adding moisturizing drops to your eye routine. If you must touch your eyes for any reason — even to administer eye medicine — wash your hands first with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

Use common sense to stay healthy.

Wash your hands a lot. Follow good contact lens hygiene. And avoid touching or rubbing your nose, mouth and eyes.

Get more information about eye health from EyeSmart—provided by the American Academy of Ophthalmology—at aao.org/eyesmart.

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