



Department of Health

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Dear College/University Communities:

I wanted to give you all an update on what is happening nationally and what we have been doing at the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) to monitor for illness related to the outbreak of a new form of coronavirus (novel coronavirus) first detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province in central China. As you most likely know from the news media, federal officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are monitoring the situation at the national level and are working very closely with staff in state health departments who are conducting surveillance and coordinating testing for possible travel-related cases.

As of Feb. 3, 2020, US-bound passengers who have traveled to China within 14 days of their arrival to the United States will be routed to one of 11 designated US airports that have implemented enhanced screening procedures and the capacity to quarantine passengers, if needed. This will largely limit the spread of the virus, as US health officials will know exactly who is at risk of contracting the virus and let the Rhode Island Department of Health know if any Rhode Islanders need to be monitored.

While the respiratory illness related to the virus is spreading quickly in China, there are currently only 12 cases in the United States (none in Rhode Island, one in Massachusetts). RIDOH, like all other health departments nationally, is following CDC's guidelines and has been coordinating closely with healthcare providers to ensure they understand the guidance and know how to evaluate any patients who have traveled to China and are ill. Healthcare providers have been instructed to evaluate patients for possible novel coronavirus infection if they have a fever and symptoms of lower respiratory illness (such as cough or difficulty breathing), **and** if they have traveled to China in the two weeks before symptom onset (or if they had close contact with a person who has a confirmed case of coronavirus).

The people with confirmed cases of the illness are held in isolation when detected. While the disease has been shown to spread from person to person, what we know at this time is that it is not easily spread and you must be in close contact with someone (for example, within six feet) to catch the virus. **Having casual contact with someone who is ill is not a risk factor and the virus is NOT currently spreading widely in the community in the United States. Because of these factors, the CDC believes the risk right now for people in the United States to be low.**

It is really important to understand that **someone's nationality alone is *not* a risk factor for coronavirus**. Unfortunately, fears of the virus are fueling anti-Chinese racism around the world and here at home in Rhode Island. RIDOH staff who are receiving calls from the public are hearing many stories of fear and discrimination. Of course, when people aren't informed about an emerging health issue, there is a tendency to feel afraid. RIDOH's leading priorities center around health equity. With that in mind, it is important to be well informed in order to share accurate information and dispel myths that can be hurtful to the Asian community. RIDOH staff have received such questions as, "Should I stop eating Chinese food?", "Do I have to avoid visits to Chinatown in Boston?", and "My neighbor in my apartment complex is Chinese and recently travelled to China. Do I have to move out of my apartment?" Given what experts know now, the answer to these questions is no.

As you know, the flu is circulating in Rhode Island right now. Because human coronaviruses are most commonly spread through respiratory droplets, we are reminding all Rhode Islanders to take the same measures that healthcare providers recommend each year to prevent the spread of the flu and other viruses:

- Get your flu shot and encourage the people around you to do the same.
- Wash your hands often throughout the day. Use warm water and soap. If soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based hand gel.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow. Flu is spread through coughing or sneezing on other people or into your hands. Cover your coughs and sneezes to prevent others from getting sick.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage your stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat nutritious foods.
- Keep surfaces (especially bedside tables, surfaces in the bathroom, and toys for children) clean by wiping them down with a household disinfectant.

For the most updated information about novel coronavirus, visit RIDOH's website at <https://health.ri.gov/ncov>. Fact sheets are available on that page in [English](#), [Spanish](#), and [Chinese](#). RIDOH's webpage about novel coronavirus in Spanish is available at <https://health.ri.gov/otherlanguages/spanish/diseases/ncov/>). For other questions about the new coronavirus, please call RIDOH's Health Information Line at 401-222-5960.

We know that times of uncertainty can cause anxiety. The American Psychological Association offers some great [tips to help manage anxiety](#) about the novel coronavirus. You may also wish to speak with your school counseling center.

Thank you for your help in taking personal steps to protect yourself, your community, and the people you care about.

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Rhode Island Director of Health