

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 lung illness.

People who are exposed to coronavirus may show symptoms anywhere from two to 14 days after exposure. 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, sneezes, or talks, virus particles can spray from their mouth or nose onto 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. You can also become infected by touching your eyes after touching something that has the virus on it.

It might be possible for coronavirus to cause a pink eye infection (conjunctivitis), but this is extremely 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

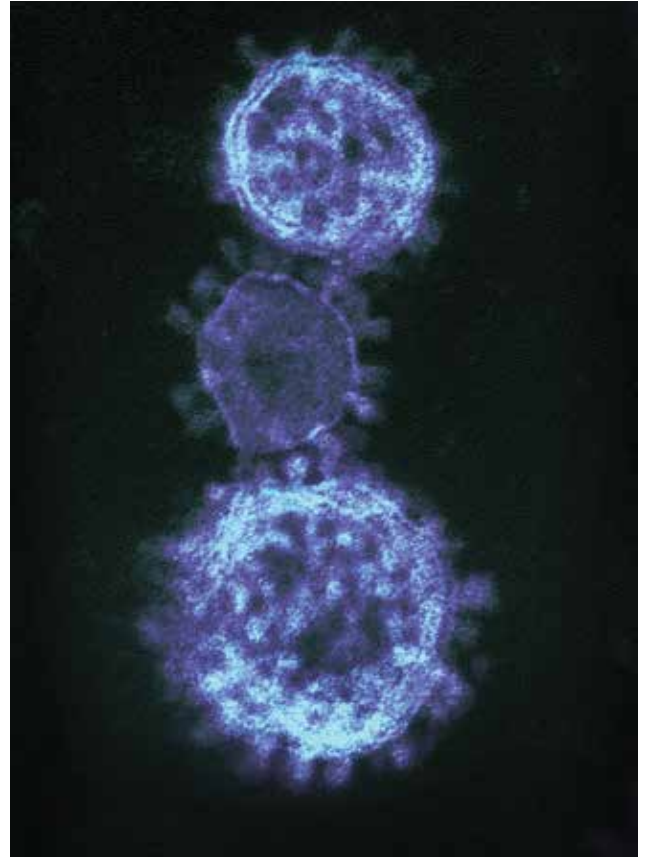


Photo credit: National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID).

eyes, or touches objects contaminated by the discharge.

Eye care during the COVID-19 outbreak

For everyone's health and safety, ophthalmologists and other doctors are being urged not to see patients during the coronavirus pandemic except for urgent or emergency care. This is important for two reasons:

- Limiting contact between doctors and patients is key to helping reduce the spread of the coronavirus.
- The entire nation must conserve vital disposable medical supplies (like masks and face shields) so they can be used in hospitals where they are most needed right now.
- Your eye doctor may use a special plastic breath shield on the slit-lamp machine they use to look into your eyes. They may also wear a mask with a plastic shield over their eyes.
- Your doctor may ask you to wait to speak until after your eye exam is complete. Then they can talk with you and answer questions when they can be a safe distance from you.
- Some practices may use telemedicine for “virtual” visits over the phone or video chat over a computer.

You will likely find that routine patient visits will be rescheduled. Any eye surgeries and procedures that are **not emergencies** will be postponed.

Call your ophthalmologist for guidance in the following situations:

- You have macular degeneration or diabetic retinopathy and get regular eye injections
- You notice changes in your vision (like blurry, wavy or blank spots in your field of vision)
- You notice a lot of new floaters or flashes in your vision
- You suddenly lose some vision
- You have eye pain, headache, red eye, nausea and vomiting

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

Expect changes to eye exams and procedures:

- 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.
- The clinic is likely restricting the number of people that enter. If you do not need someone to be there with you, please do not bring anyone to your appointment.

You will be asked to follow precautions:

- If you have a cough or a fever, or have been in close contact with someone who has these symptoms, 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.

Protecting your eyes and health

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

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.

Wearing glasses may add a layer of protection.

Corrective eyeglasses 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.

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.

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. Then wash them again after touching your eyes.

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.

If you have any questions about your eyes or your vision, be sure to ask your ophthalmologist.

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

COMPLIMENTS OF:

