Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CDC 24/7: Saving Lives, Protecting People™

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID–19)

Interim Guidance: Public Health Communicators Get Your Community Ready for Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID–19)

This interim guidance is based on what is currently known about the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) will update this interim guidance as needed and as additional information becomes available.

This interim guidance is intended for state and local public health information officers, health communication specialists, health educators, and other public health professionals responsible for planning communication strategies before, during, and after an outbreak of corognavirus disease (COVID-19).

This guidance provides information about nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) and their use during a COVID-19 outbreak. NPIs are actions, apart from getting vaccinated and taking antiviral medications, that people and communities can take to help slow the spread of respiratory illnesses like COVID-19.

COVID-19 is an emerging disease and there is more to learn about its transmission, severity, and how it will take shape in the United States. Everyone can do their part to help plan, prepare, and respond to this emerging public health threat.

CDC has developed recommendations for how to communicate with people in your community about a COVID-19 outbreak. The **Before**, **During**, and **After** sections of this guide offer suggested strategies to help you plan for and implement these recommendations.

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Before a COVID-19 outbreak occurs in your community: Plan

Preparedness should focus on strengthening the systems and structures that support effective and well-coordinated communication, and not solely on the development of communication messages.

A good emergency communication plan encourages community leaders and stakeholders to plan now for a COVID-19 outbreak and other types of emergencies. Before an outbreak occurs, focus on raising awareness and educating audiences about nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) and other public health respiratory infection-prevention strategies. Identify key community relationships and leverage them to help educate and prepare audiences. It takes time to build relationships. Engage internal and external partners and stakeholders early in your planning process. **Coordinating your planning efforts with them can help establish strong lines of communication and ensure that information is consistent before and during a COVID-19 outbreak in your community.**

Become familiar with key COVID-19 prevention messages and NPI recommendations

✓ **Read and understand "Everyday Preventive Actions".** This list identifies personal health habits that people should use all the time, including to help protect themselves and their families against COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses.

✓ **Read and understand CDC's audience-specific COVID-19 NPI guidance documents and communication materials.** Tailored guidance and resources addressing COVID-19 planning are available for individuals and communities.

✓ **Take CDC's NPI 101 Web-based training.** State, tribal, local, and territorial public health officials can complete an interactive course (developed by CDC for pandemic influenza preparedness) to increase their understanding of NPIs and how to plan for the use of NPIs before, during, and after a pandemic to help slow spread of disease. The NPI training ↗ is applicable to COVID-19. Register for "NPI 101" External on CDC TRAIN. The following free CE credits are provided: 0.2 CEU/CE, 1.5 CHES, 1.75 CME, 1.5 CNE Contact Hours, and 2 CPHCE.

Update your existing emergency communication plan

✓ **Meet with your existing emergency planning and operations team to update the emergency communication plan for your state or local community.**

- Review all aspects of your plan, such as staffing, communication strategies, trainings, tools, policies, equipment, systems and procedures for clearing and approving information, and other resources.
- Develop or update your plan based on various scenarios your state or local community may face during a COVID-19 outbreak.

✓ **Establish systems for sharing information with key partners and stakeholders.**

- Identify everyone in your chain of communication (e.g., new and existing partners and stakeholders, others in your own agency, and other health departments), and create or update a comprehensive contact list.
- Maintain up-to-date primary and secondary contact information for everyone in the chain.
- Determine when and what type of information to share with those in your communication chain.
- Identify platforms, such as a hotline, automated text messaging, email, social media, and a website, to help disseminate information to internal and external partners and audiences.

Help community members prepare for COVID-19

✓ **Encourage community members to plan for COVID-19.**

- Promote the practice of everyday preventive actions before an outbreak occurs (e.g., staying home when sick, covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue, washing hands often, and cleaning frequently touched surfaces). Identify up-to-date resources and tools to household members plan and prepare for COVID-19.

✓ **Create a COVID-19 communication workgroup with representatives from key partners and stakeholders.**

- Include communication, marketing, and public relations professionals who work in various community settings, such as childcare programs, healthcare facilities, pharmacies, schools, workplaces, community- and faith-based organizations, and public and private organizations.
- Discuss with the workgroup the emergency communication plan for your state or local community.
- Determine how to coordinate COVID-19 outbreak communication between workgroup members. Encourage their participation in other community-wide COVID-19 readiness activities.

Note: Inform workgroup members about workshops, programs, and other activities they can implement within their organizations to inspire the public to consistently practice good personal health habits and prepare for emergencies.

✓ **Engage communities in a dialogue about COVID-19 readiness.**

- Conduct needs assessments or focus groups with community members to gather information about their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and challenges related to NPIs and COVID-19. Use their feedback to improve your communication strategies, messages, and materials.

Note: Work closely with workgroup members and key partners and stakeholders to address COVID-19 readiness challenges and barriers identified by audiences in your community. Identifying solutions to help audiences move past barriers may help people change habits and better adapt to changing circumstances during an outbreak.

Update information needs and community resources

✓ **Identify target audiences and communication channels.** Work with workgroup members and key partners and stakeholders to define audiences and develop strategies to reach every member of the community. Additional strategies may be needed to reach high-risk and vulnerable populations ⬈ , such as:

- Women, infants, and children
- Older adults
- Persons with disabilities
- Persons with access and functional needs

Note: Some NPI actions may draw public attention and can have negative psychosocial and economic consequences on groups and individuals to which they are applied during an outbreak, especially to high-risk and vulnerable populations. Include in your communication plan strategies and messages that address fear, stigmatization, and discrimination.

✓ **Address any gaps in communication resources, materials, or processes.**

✓ **Identify the training needs of workgroup members and key partners and stakeholders.**

- Identify existing trainings or develop new trainings about NPIs, decision-making, and risk communication.
- Ensure communicators across sectors have the necessary skills and understanding to develop emergency communication plans and promote COVID-19 readiness within their organizations.

✓ **Become a resource for COVID-19 information.**

- Tailor ready-to-use messages and materials (fact sheets, checklists, and frequently asked questions) for each audience.
- Prepare resources that educate people about the importance of adopting NPI measures (like staying home when sick).
- Use plain language and include examples and pictures in your materials to improve understanding.
- Visit CDC's website for messages and materials about NPIs and COVID-19. Visit **CDC's Health Literacy** page for more information about plain language.

Assess procedures and technology resources needed for timely communication during a COVID-19 outbreak

✓ **Review, exercise, and update communication policies, procedures, and systems for updating, clearing, approving, and disseminating information (both internally and externally).**

- Make sure information is accurate and consistent during an emergency and flows promptly and frequently to the correct audiences.
- Review your system for tracking and responding to inquiries received from the public, partners, and stakeholders.

Note: Communication after-action reports and improvement plans (AARs/IPs) from recent public health emergency responses can offer practical and helpful insights.

✓ **Identify existing and needed technology resources.**

- Assess and update the availability of technology and equipment, such as mobile phones, computers, internet access, and wireless devices, so they are ready for immediate use.
- If needed resources do not exist inside your organization, create a plan for acquiring them or identify sources from which you can access technology during a COVID-19 outbreak.

Plan for the dissemination of COVID-19 information

✓ **Create a plan for interacting with news media.**

- The media can serve as a vital link in providing up-to-date information and helping to deliver key messages to the public.
- Develop a strategy for communicating directly with the public, working with the media, and responding to inquiries.

✓ **Identify multiple spokespersons or subject matter experts.**

- Experts who will serve as spokespersons should be experienced in public health emergencies and COVID-19. Include representatives from limited English-speaking communities.
- Provide training, as needed, so they are comfortable speaking to news media and able to answer challenging questions using plain language (clear communication). See **Crisis and** 🗎 **Emergency Risk Communication: By Leaders** 🗎 **for Leaders** 🗎 to learn more about the role of a spokesperson.

Develop a plan for using current social media.

- Plan ways to incorporate popular or topical social media platforms that can help you promote key messages and quickly update people with new information. Social media platforms also provide direct access to your target audiences, giving you opportunities to engage in real-time discussions for information gathering and evaluation purposes.
- Use best practices and principles of effective risk communication; you may want to localize and redistribute CDC messaging on social media.

Develop a communication evaluation plan. Use these questions to help you measure the effectiveness of your emergency communication plan:

- Can your audiences find, understand, and use your information?
- Are your key messages culturally appropriate and in plain language?
- Are you successfully increasing awareness by disseminating resources and materials?
- Are communication activities being successfully coordinated with internal and external partners and stakeholders?
- Can you confirm that timely information is being provided throughout the duration of the COVID-19 outbreak?
- Is misinformation being spread on social media, or elsewhere? If so, how are you counteracting it?

Test and update your emergency communication plan.

- Practice the actions outlined in your plan.
- Ensure systems and procedures support communication activities needed during a COVID-19 outbreak.
- Refine messages, materials, and tools.
- Encourage workgroup members to test the emergency communication plans for their organizations.

During a COVID-19 outbreak in your community: Act

Maintain ongoing communication with your workgroup members, partners, and stakeholders once COVID-19 is in your local community. Coordinate COVID-19 communication activities with news media and other channels to ensure consistent messaging. If you must use technical terminology and concepts, be sure to define them and include examples to help improve understanding. For example, create messages that clearly explain COVID-19 and NPIs.

Your communication should be early, empathetic, accurate, and effective. **Early** communication of COVID-19 information helps limit misinformation and rumors that could contribute to confusion and fear. **Empathetic** communication conveys concern and reassurance, empowers people, and reduces emotional turmoil. **Accurate** communication provides the facts about a situation and what is being done to resolve it. **Effective** communication helps build understanding and guide the public, media, healthcare providers, and other groups in responding to COVID-19 and complying with public health recommendations.

Put your emergency plan into action

✓ **Stay informed about the COVID-19 situation.**

- Visit the CDC website to get up-to-date information about COVID-19.

✓ **Provide instructions for NPI implementation.**

- Explain why NPIs are necessary and effective when implemented early and practiced throughout an outbreak. Give details about what, how, when, and where NPIs will be implemented in the community.
  - To learn more about NPIs as an important community mitigation measure, visit Community Mitigation Guidelines to Prevent Pandemic Influenza — United States, 2017. Visit CDC's Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) website for more information about communicating during an emergency.

✓ **Continue to promote the daily practice of *everyday preventive actions*.**

- Provide frequent updates to the public to ensure they understand their risk for getting and spreading COVID-19 and how to reduce their risk.
- Encourage people to stay home and away from others when they are sick, to practice good health habits, and to comply with CDC or local public health recommendations to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Communicate frequently with those in your communication chain

✓ **Always give simple, credible, accurate, consistent, and timely information.**

- Be transparent and share what is known and unknown about the COVID-19 situation in your state or local community.
- Use a variety of communication channels to distribute audience-specific health messages and materials.
- Provide additional resources and web links where the public can find reliable NPI and COVID-19 information. See **Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication: Spokesperson** 🔴 to learn more about the role of a spokesperson.

✓ **Update everyone in your communication chain regularly.**

- Share updated information with your workgroup members, partners, and stakeholders to help them make decisions.

✓ **Communicate COVID-19 prevention information to those who are vulnerable and at high risk for complications.**

- Work with partners to implement communication strategies for reaching high-risk and vulnerable populations in your community (for example, people who are homeless or have limited English-language skills).
- Learn how community- and faith-based organizations can help vulnerable populations during an outbreak.

Monitor and evaluate your efforts, and change communications as needed

✓ **Monitor all media sources.**

- Use a variety of media channels to address misinformation and gather feedback about the response.

✓ **Implement actions outlined in your evaluation plan.**

- Document communication activities that have and have not happened. Explain why activities did not occur or were changed during implementation.

After a COVID-19 outbreak has ended in your community: Follow Up

Health communicators can distribute well-designed information that achieves behavior change

Work with workgroup members to identify criteria for phasing out and ending COVID-19 prevention communication activities. Maintain an attitude of preparedness by continuing to collaborate with workgroup members, partners, and stakeholders to enhance their communication skills on COVID-19 readiness and other public health issues. Use data from the response to identify new communication strategies and campaigns to facilitate long-term behavior change.

Evaluate the effectiveness your emergency communication plan

✓ **Discuss and note lessons learned.**

- Gather feedback from the public, workgroup members, partners, and stakeholders to improve your plan.
- Discuss which communication channels, materials, tools, and messages were successful, which were unsuccessful, and which were missing from your plan.
- Determine whether target audiences were reached.
- Identify additional resource needs.

✓ **Maintain and expand your COVID-19 communication workgroup.**

- Look for ways to expand community partnerships.
- Identify trusted representatives from the community and federal, state, or local agencies or organizations needed to help you prepare for COVID-19.

The timing of a COVID-19 outbreak cannot be predicted but having a plan in place is very important. Communication is an essential part of any successful public health response. Coordinate your planning activities with internal and external partners and stakeholders to help prepare your community for COVID-19 and achieve your emergency communication goals and objectives.

COVID-19 Readiness Resources

- Visit cdc.gov/COVID19 for the latest information and resources
- COVID 2019 Situation Summary
- Prevention and Treatment
- What to Do If You Are Sick
- Pregnant Women and COVID-19 FAQs
- Stigma Related to COVID-19
- Handwashing: A Family Activity
- Handwashing: Clean Hands Save Lives

CDC Interim Guidance for Specific Audiences

- Interim Guidance for Administrators of US Childcare Programs and K-12 Schools to Plan, Prepare, and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)
- Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers to Plan and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

CDC Communication Resources

- Communication Resources
- Print Resources
- Buttons and Badges

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