

A one-page, printable guide for preparing to shelter at home

Our recommendations for surviving boredom, loneliness, and the coronavirus.

By Kelsey Piper | Mar 19, 2020, 3:20pm EDT

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Imagine, two weeks from now, the country is functionally in quarantine. Only groceries and pharmacies remain open, and there are limits on how many people can be inside them at once. Other stores are closed, and many delivery services have shut down.

If this sounds dire, it's a description of where Italy is, right now, in the coronavirus pandemic. And by some measures, we look to be **following Italy's trajectory fairly closely**, with about a two-week lag. So now isn't a time for panic, but it is a time for preparation — to be ready for weeks or even months when much is shut down. Even if you're in a location where stores are staying open, many of us won't want to go into the crowded public spaces we typically frequent without another thought.

"People should be prepared to hunker down," Dr. Caitlin Rivers at the Center for Health Security at Johns Hopkins University told Vox. "I don't think we have turned the corner yet."

So what do you need? How should you think about preparing? While store shelves are emptier than usual and lots of items are out of stock, many people still haven't really thought about what the weeks and months ahead will hold — it may well be like nothing we've ever seen before. Here's a guide to the essentials (and **a version made for printing**).

How to prepare for staying at home

CLEANING

Soap

It's the best way to wash up (and much easier to find than hand sanitizer).

Disposable gloves

For handling things that might be contaminated. Do not wash or reuse.

Disinfectant wipes

Look for products with active ingredients such as quaternary ammonium, sodium hypochlorite, or hydrogen peroxide.

Towels, clean linens

Or anything else you might need more of as cleaning habits change.

FOOD/NECESSITIES

Supplies of shelf-stable food

Beans, rice, flour, and canned items: enough for a couple of weeks, if access to grocery stores is limited.

Coffee or tea

Or other everyday "necessities."

A first aid kit

Hospitals may be overwhelmed, so you'll want to be able to treat minor problems at home.

90 days of medication

The CDC recommends stocking up on prescriptions, so contact your doctor.

WORK AND ENTERTAINMENT

Yarn, art supplies, or other hobby items

It's a good time to dive into an activity you can do at home. Morale matters!

Things for working from home

From a desk chair to a mouse, it's better to have the tools for your job if it's possible to work remotely.

Electronics and, potentially, spare parts

If your phone or computer breaks, it's an inconvenience in the best of times. Right now, it might be more than that, if stores aren't open to get a replacement.

Games for family time

If you've got kids at home, you'll need distractions!

IF YOU GET SICK

Medication for reducing a fever, like acetaminophen (Tylenol).

A thermometer for monitoring a fever.

Cough and cold medication

Including cough drops and lozenges, cough syrups like Dayquil/Nyquil, and decongestants like Sudafed.

A humidifier can also help with a cough that makes it tough to sleep.

Rehydration solutions

Pedialyte or Gatorade works, but you can make it at home with a liter of drinking water, a scoop of sugar, and a pinch of salt. Plain water or other liquids also work for mild dehydration in adults.

Not everyone can afford to respond by stocking up on necessities. For many people living on the margins, the virus has already disrupted paychecks and livelihoods, and more disruptions are coming. But if you can afford to make some purchases now that will make the outbreak easier to weather, you will be **helping to protect your fellow citizens** who can't.

Every additional person in a store increases the odds of coronavirus spread, and many people can unknowingly be carriers. Staying home means that sick people (including those who don't yet realize they are sick) spread the virus to fewer additional people. If on average they spread it to fewer than one

additional person, case numbers will shrink. And even just **delaying the growth in case numbers** can save lives by buying us more time to prepare.

So preparing for the isolation yourself and your family may soon be facing isn't selfish; it's one way to help protect people who don't have the resources to prepare themselves. It lets you avoid excursions that might get them sick. It also lets you weather problems at home, instead of clogging an urgent care center or the emergency room when both are likely to be overwhelmed.

If you can afford to buy some things that will enable you to ride out social distancing, local supply shocks, school closings, and potentially getting sick, it's a sensible thing to do. That said, don't panic-buy enormous quantities of things you won't need. Making it harder for other people to get those things actually puts you in greater danger!

Here is an expanded version of the guide above on some purchases that might make an unnerving few weeks go a little more smoothly.

Cleaning products

Keeping your living quarters, personal appliances, and surfaces clean is not just good general practice — it's increasingly important as we learn more about how the coronavirus can spread and linger on devices like phones. But that doesn't mean you need to douse everything in Lysol; some basic household products and good practices will help a great deal.

- **Soap:** You've probably seen the run on Purell and other hand sanitizers — which are sold out in many places or prohibitively priced online. But **good old soap and water is the recommended way to get clean**, and is still available. Get a soap you like using; the most important thing is that you're actually willing to use it to regularly wash your hands for a minimum of 20 seconds.

"Wash your hands much more than you think you need to wash your hands," Dr. Rebecca Katz, director of the Center for Global Health Science and Security at Georgetown University, told me. "It's not satisfactory because people feel they should be doing much more, but at this point it's the best advice we can be giving." Don't neglect the more important basic measures that can protect your health and safety just because now much more intense precautions have been added as well.

- **Towels, clean linens, anything else you might need more of if your cleaning habits change:** If your family is like mine, after washing your hands, you all dry them on a bathroom towel that is laundered whenever someone remembers to get around to it. Consider buying some more bathroom towels and swapping them out more frequently. In general, rethink your household habits now that you're hopefully washing more, wiping down surfaces more, and spending more time at home — what do you need to keep up your improved habits?
- **Disinfectant wipes:** Wiping down surfaces (including your phone) can make sure the virus doesn't linger on them. Most disinfectant wipes will work fine for this, but do check this **list from the EPA** to make sure your preferred cleaning product is actually virus-killing — some natural cleaning products are not.

- **Disposable gloves:** Wearing gloves is great for reminding me not to touch my face (though unless you are removing them properly and not washing or reusing them, they don't make it safe to touch contaminated surfaces). Anxious about the virus being transmitted by **mail and packages**, my family has been opening them on the front porch with gloves on. You probably don't need to be that paranoid, but if someone in your house gets sick, you might want gloves to handle contaminated substances. And once we had a supply around, we found that they also make diaper changes less unpleasant.

Food, groceries, necessities

The food supply chain is not going to break down. and hoarding can cause problems, but “people might want to slowly start to stock up on enough nonperishable food to last their households through several weeks of social distancing at home,” risk communications experts Jody Lanard and Peter Sandman **have written**. You should be planning for interruptions and inconveniences, but needn't fear a famine.

Looking at how the coronavirus has played out in other countries, it seems likely that people will need to plan for less frequent access to grocery stores, and if they get sick, they might not want to go out shopping at all. It's also possible many communities might be home for a long time, potentially months, so boredom is a real concern as many public activities are limited. Consider buying:

- **Supplies of shelf-stable food** if access to grocery stores is limited for a while. For example, your city or county might start limiting how many people can be in the store at a time, creating long lines, as **some areas of Italy have done**. The cheapest way to make sure you stay fed is probably some big bags of rice and dry beans, but keep in mind that food is important to your morale, too — snacks you actually like may make long periods of restricted movement more bearable. My home has stocked up on chocolate and popcorn as well as flour, butter, lentils, and rice.
- **Coffee or tea** is good to have on hand, especially if you have a caffeine habit. You will be much less happy stuck at home without them, and as things get worse a run out to the local coffee shop may not be a good idea (or your city or county may close all nonessential businesses).
- **A first aid kit:** Hospitals in parts of the US are **likely to be overwhelmed**. Already, many are **canceled non-emergency surgeries**. That means it will be harder to access hospitals for injuries and illnesses that have nothing to do with the coronavirus, former ICU nurse Miranda Dixon-Luinenburg told me. “Even in the moderate-bad case, ER wait times” will be out of control, she said. And if you don't have the coronavirus yet, “you do not want to be waiting there for many hours even if they will eventually see you,” because you'd be at high risk of catching it from someone else in the waiting room.

So be prepared to treat everything from home: Do you have rehydration fluids? bandages? Over-the-counter meds? Antiseptic wipes? Cold packs? Things like food poisoning or stomach flu can be safely treated at home unless you're “unable to keep down any fluids and have symptoms of dehydration,” Dixon-Luinenburg said. Cuts can be treated at home with gauze to stop the bleeding, polysporin, and bandages unless there are “signs of infection (area is warm, very tender, swollen, red, or draining pus), or if bleeding won't stop,” she told me.

“For injuries that might be sprains/might be broken, probably this pushes toward waiting it out and treating with ice + rest + painkillers, rather than immediately going to the ER to check. (If you can put weight on it, it's

probably not broken). If your arm is bent in two pieces, though, it is definitely broken and cannot be dealt with at home.”

As I told my 3-year-old yesterday, doctors are very busy and it’s a bad time for acrobatics on the stairs — and a bad time to be unprepared if your 3-year-old does them anyway.

- If your doctor and insurance will approve you stocking up on **90 days of medication**, the CDC recommends doing so.

Fighting the war on boredom

Many states initially announced shutdowns for a few weeks. But experts say we should expect things to be closed for much longer than that. “I think we will continue to see an expansion of the epidemic here in the US,” Rivers told me. “I think we will also see corresponding mitigation measures.” So you should expect that it may be months before you can return to your normal life. Plan what you’ll need to keep yourself and your family entertained at home.

- **Hobbies:** Have you been considering taking up embroidery? Knitting? Miniature furniture making? Baking? It’s a good time to dive into an activity you can do at home. Morale matters!
- **Things for working-from-home:** If your job is possible to do remotely, you should prepare for being encouraged or asked to work from home for the next few months. Make sure you have a desk and a chair that’s comfortable, and consider other contingencies like a prepaid wifi hotspot for if your internet’s being unreliable.
- **Electronics and, potentially, spare parts:** If your phone or computer breaks, it’s an inconvenience in the best of times. Right now, it might be more than that, if you’re relying on your connected devices for work or interactions with the outside world and stores aren’t open to get a replacement. If you can afford a backup phone, a spare battery, or replacement parts for the devices you rely on, then you’re not one unfortunate spill from disaster.
- **Things for quality time:** Face it, you might be stuck with family, roommates, or partners for a while (and experts do not recommend even small gatherings with other families, which can still transmit the virus). So have on hand some things you can do together: board games, video games, sheet music for sing-alongs, popcorn for movie nights. If you can’t afford to purchase much, keep in mind that many activities that can make the long days go by faster are basically free: My family is planning a D&D game, which can be run with free online materials and a **set of dice** (if the dice are too pricy, your phone will do the trick).

For if you get sick

According to data from China, for around 80 percent of people that contract coronavirus, the symptoms are mild. “Mild,” though, doesn’t mean that it’ll just be a cold — it just means that you won’t require hospitalization. It may still feel like the worst flu of your life.

Getting by at home, though, means that hospital beds can be reserved for those who need them. “If you are doing fine at home, you should stay at home,” Rivers told me.

So stock up on things that help you get through a bad fever and a bad cough, plus some **other unpleasant symptoms**. That probably includes:

- **Medication for reducing a fever**, like acetaminophen (Tylenol). There's nothing like trying to figure out dosing instructions for medications, while miserable and sick, so look that information up now! If you can't manage your fever with over the counter medication, seek medical attention.
- **A thermometer** for monitoring your fever. This can help you notice that you're sick in the first place (**fever is the most common symptom** and often the first) and help you notice if your fever is dangerously high or if medication is failing to manage it.
- **Medication for managing a cough**, including cough drops and lozenges, and cough syrups like Dayquil/Nyquil. Stuffy/runny nose seems to be rare among Covid-19 patients, but for illnesses in general, decongestants like Sudafed can be helpful.
- **A humidifier** can also help a lot with a cough that makes it tough to sleep. If you don't own a humidifier, sitting in a steamy room (like one where the shower is running) can help.
- **Rehydration solutions**. You can buy these in the form of something like Pedialyte or Gatorade, or make one at home with a liter of drinking water, a scoop of sugar, and a pinch of salt. Staying hydrated while you're sick can help you recover faster and ensure you don't need medical attention — which may only be available to the very ill. I ordered Gatorade because I prefer the taste: The best rehydration solution is one you'll actually want to drink. (But don't get the sugar-free kind — sugar is what your body needs!)
- I also purchased a **finger pulse oximeter** — which costs about \$20 — the last time I had a respiratory illness. When it feels like you're having trouble breathing, it can be hard to know if it's just anxiety or if you're really having trouble getting enough air. The oximeter measures whether you're actually short of breath. In healthy people, blood oxygen levels are usually 96-100. "Home ones are unreliable (honestly, hospital ones are unreliable!)," Dixon-Luinenberg told me, "so take a reading seriously if it's more than five minutes on several different fingers while you're sitting comfortably still and with warm hands. A sustained reading under 92 percent is worrying."

But for me, the oximeter was mostly useful for anxiety — I could slip it on my finger and be reassured that I was likely not very sick and didn't need a doctor at all.

If self-care at home isn't enough, you should call ahead before seeking medical attention so that precautions can be taken, experts say. "If you do start to get worried you're not doing well at home, you can call your doctor's office or call the emergency room," Rivers told me. "Call ahead so they know you're coming and can make sure you're not sitting in the waiting room."

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