

Expert Public Health Panel Offers Coronavirus Guidance

A panel of experts spoke and answered questions about the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the Brown Lounge on March 2. The discussion was moderated by Dr. Lora Iannotti, Associate Dean for Public Health and Associate Professor at the Brown School. The panelists:

- Dr. Hilary Babcock, Medical Director, BJC Prevention and Epidemiology Consortium, Professor, Infectious Disease Division
- Dr. Shenyang Guo, Distinguished Professor at the Brown School, Assistant Vice-Chancellor for International Affairs, Greater China.
- Dr. Yujia Lei, Psychologist, Habif Center for Health and Wellness
- Dr. Ruopeng An, Assistant Professor, Brown School
- Sarah Kang, MPH student at the Brown School

Key takeaways from the panel:

The health of students, faculty and staff are the highest priority of Washington University leadership. Teams have been formed to plan for various scenarios and impacts on the university community (e.g. student work/salaries). Up to date information can be found on Inside Brown and at <https://emergency.wustl.edu/tools-resources/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus>

~~COVID-19 is not currently a pandemic. It is “a Public Health Emergency of international Concern,” according to Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General of the World Health Organization.~~

The vast majority of cases are mild. The virus currently has a fatality rate of about 2-3 percent, but older people, males, and people with other serious underlying diseases, such as diabetes, are at greater risk of death. Children do not seem to be at higher risk, as they are with influenza. The COVID-19 fatality rate may drop once all cases are known.

Symptoms include fever, cough, shortness of breath. The incubation period is 2-14 days.

Precautions to avoid getting or spreading the virus include: Washing hands frequently (hand sanitizer works!), and staying home when ill.

Social and policy determinants will also play a role in outcomes. Smoking, the quality of our health care system and truthful communication channels, quarantines and travel restrictions will be among the factors.

Not all information circulating about the virus is accurate. The most reliable information is from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov) and other government agencies, rather than social media. People should check the credibility of sources of information and be cautious of conspiracy theories or over-simplification.

Wearing a surgical mask is unlikely to prevent contracting the virus in one's daily routine, and even at crowded places like airports. Most transmissions occur when people touch surfaces that have been infected. The benefit of masks is for those in close, face-to-face proximity to an infected person, like doctors or nurses.

It's OK to be worried. The outbreak has many unknowns and much ambiguity, which naturally leads to anxiety. One coping strategy is not to fixate on aspects of the virus and the future that you cannot control, but bring your attention back to the present, and what you can control in your own life. The university offers mental health resources for those who would like help with this.

It's not OK to discriminate against people from other countries. COVID-19 is a global issue, and it is not a reason to fear or disrespect other people. Instances of bias should be reported to the university.

Travel restrictions currently as of 3/9/20 apply to China, South Korea, Italy and Iran. Travelers to other international destinations will likely face increased screening at airports.

There are important lessons to be learned from the COVID-19 outbreak. Our health systems lack mechanisms for dealing with viruses like this. We need to improve public health preparedness and infrastructure. It is an opportunity for the fields of social work, public health and social policy.

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