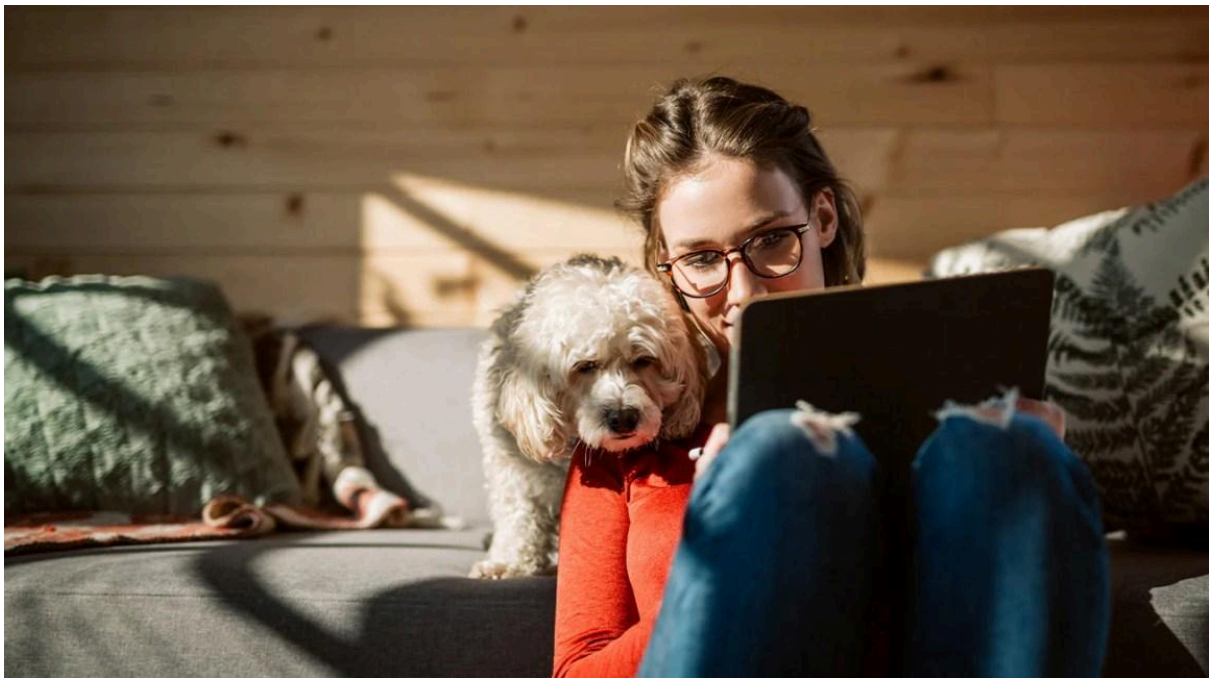


What Does a Stay-at-Home Order Mean? 11 Questions Answered



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Stay-at-home orders restrict people from leaving their homes for anything other than essential activities. They're intended to limit people's contact with each other in order to slow the spread of the disease. Getty Images

- On March 16, 2020, the U.S. government announced a set of guidelines intended to slow the spread of COVID-19.

- Individual states have now begun to issue stay-at-home orders as well.
- Stay-at-home orders restrict people from leaving their homes for anything other than essential activities.
- They're intended to limit people's contact with each other in order to slow the spread of the disease.
- Slowing the spread of COVID-19 will prevent hospitals from becoming overwhelmed with more cases than they can handle.

As of March 24, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that there have been 54,453 reported cases of COVID-19

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within the United States and its territories.

In addition, there have been 737 deaths.

In response to the growing threat presented by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the organism that causes COVID-19, the U.S. government announced a set of guidelines on March 16 intended to slow the spread of the disease.

In addition, individual states are now beginning to issue stay-at-home orders.

Exactly what do these orders mean, and how will they affect the public?

[name removed] consulted a pair of experts to answer some of the most frequently asked questions.

1. What does a stay-at-home order mean?

According to Brian Labus, PhD, MPH, an assistant professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, a stay-at-home order means you should remain at home and away from other people unless it's absolutely necessary to go out.

“We want people to stay at home as much as possible, but make exceptions to go out for medical care, food, and essential work,” explained Labus.

Although some have been calling it a shelter-in-place order, this isn't actually the case, Labus said.

A shelter-in-place order would mean that you couldn't go out for any reason due to an immediate threat to your life and safety.

“If you do not follow a shelter-in-place order, you put your life at risk.

“If you do not follow a stay-at-home order, you put the community at risk in addition to yourself,” he said.

2. What is the purpose of a stay-at-home order?

According to Aline M. Holmes, DNP, RN, clinical associate professor and director, Clinical Systems Project, Rutgers University School of Nursing, the purpose of a stay-at-home order is to limit how many people are exposed to the virus.

“If we allowed everyone to go about their business as usual, most everyone would come in contact with the virus,” said Holmes. “Of those, about 80 percent would get pretty sick, and of those, about 20 percent will need to be hospitalized.”

Using her own state of New Jersey as an example, Holmes noted that it has a population of around 8.9 million people. If 80 percent got sick and 20 percent of those needed hospitalization, New Jersey’s healthcare system would become overwhelmed.

“By restricting the number of folks exposed to the virus at any one time, we can spread the number of cases over a longer length of time — hopefully enough time to manage staffing and resources better,” said Holmes.

3. What kind of things can I do when there is a stay-at-home order?

Labus said you can still do essential activities like getting medical care and shopping for food, medicine, and supplies.

In addition, gas stations and mechanics are open, as well as essential services such as banks, the post office, and shipping companies.

Gyms and public pools will also be closed during this time, but going out for a walk or run where you aren't around other people is fine.

If you work in a business that's considered essential, you may still go to work.

4. What kind of things can I not do when there is a stay-at-home order?

Labus said the main thing you shouldn't be doing is gathering with other people when there isn't an essential need to do so.

Activities like parties, visiting entertainment venues, or dining out will all have to be postponed, he said, although you can still take food to go or have it delivered to your home.

Labus also suggested that even though schools are closed, we shouldn't treat it as if kids are on vacation. "This is not the time for them to get together and play," said Labus, "even if they are outside."

5. How long might an order have to remain in effect?

Labus said that right now we don't really know how long a stay-at-home order might have to remain in effect.

"It all depends on how well people follow the stay-at-home orders and how the outbreak responds."

He noted that we may see case counts rise temporarily since it takes time for people to become sick and to be tested. This means that an effective response won't be immediately obvious.

6. Are there things I should be stocking up on?

Holmes suggested stocking up on frozen and canned fruits and vegetables, bread, pasta, frozen meals, meats, and fish, and limiting visits to the grocery store for perishables like milk, eggs, and fresh fruits and vegetables.

You can also check into having your food delivered by Peapod, Amazon, or a local grocery store, she said.

However, Labus added, it isn't necessary to hoard toilet paper, water, or food.

"Stores will continue to remain open and our food supply is intact, so there is no reason to buy several months' worth of food.

"There is also no reason to expect our water supply to fail, as this isn't a natural disaster like an earthquake, so you don't need to stockpile water."

7. What can I do to protect myself when I leave home?

The CDC recommends

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that all people wear cloth face masks in public places where it's difficult to maintain a 6-foot distance from others.

This will help slow the spread of the virus from people without symptoms or people who do not know they have contracted the virus.

Cloth face masks should be worn while continuing to practice physical distancing. Instructions for making masks at home can be found [here](#)

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Note: It's critical to reserve surgical masks and N95 respirators for healthcare workers.

Holmes said the goal is to avoid inhaling any droplets containing the virus in the event that someone near you sneezes or coughs.

You can use hand sanitizer after you leave the store, she noted, but you also want to wash your hands for 20 seconds as soon as you get home and after you've put your groceries away.

Labus further noted that it's important to maintain a distance of at least 6 feet between ourselves and others.

8. Do I need to practice social distancing while I am home?

"This is not the time to visit with the neighbors or your family friends," said Labus.

"You should not be having gatherings at your house, and you need to keep your distance from people outside your household as much as possible."

However, within your own home, you can't really avoid contact with the people who live with you.

You do, however, want to pay special attention to older family members and those with high risk medical conditions to avoid spreading the disease to them if you do become sick.

9. What if my state has not yet issued an order?

"It's hard to imagine that any state will not wind up with an order in the very near future," said Labus, "as we are seeing the same spread throughout the country. Some states just had their spread earlier than others.

"We know this disease is circulating," he added, "so it makes sense to take steps to keep you and your family safe even before an order is issued."

10. When should I seek medical care?

Labus suggested that for routine medical care, you should consult your healthcare provider first about whether it's essential for you to see them right away.

We “don’t want to overwhelm out medical system with things that can wait,” he said.

If you’re having symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 — for example, fever and a dry cough — Labus said to keep in mind that most people will have a mild disease that can be managed at home.

“Generally speaking, if you would not have sought care for an illness like you are having before this outbreak, there is probably no reason to do so now,” he said.

He also suggested that you can use an online tool

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provided by the CDC to help you in your decision-making about whether to seek medical care.

Holmes added that you shouldn’t go to an emergency room, clinic, or urgent care center without calling first, as this will put others at risk.

Call your healthcare provider for advice and isolate yourself from the people you live with, suggested Holmes.

“Stay in your room, don’t mingle, designate a bathroom for your use,” she said.

You also want to clean the surfaces that you touch with household bleach or other disinfectants and wash your hands frequently.

11. What if I need more information?

Labus suggested visiting the CDC website if you need further information or advice.

“They are regularly updated and represent our best understanding of how to protect yourself and the people you love.”