

Can Clothes and Shoes Track COVID-19 into Your House? What to Know



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Transfer of the novel coronavirus via clothing is unlikely, but experts agree there are a few scenarios in which immediate laundering is a good idea. Getty Images

- There have been no documented cases of transmission of the novel coronavirus via clothing and shoes at this point.

- If you are taking care of or frequently in close proximity to an individual with COVID-19, doing laundry often is an essential part of preventive hygiene.
- This includes, in particular, high risk individuals such as healthcare workers.
- Most household detergents are sufficient to kill the virus when doing laundry.

Even if you're doing your best in a self-quarantine situation to keep yourself safe, how do you keep the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, from getting in?

You're only making essential trips out for groceries. When you go out you practice safe social distancing. You wash your hands frequently and disinfect "high contact" surfaces like doorknobs and countertops when you get home.

Still, there's a nagging feeling that even though you're maintaining good hygiene, you're worried about the objects you've brought home with you. Are your groceries safe? Plastic bags? What about the clothes you're wearing? Your shoes?

There are certain inevitable truths to going shopping, and one of them is that you're going to wear shoes and clothes to do it.

Here's what we know about the transmission of the novel coronavirus through common articles of clothing.

Clothes are low risk

“There’s a lot we don’t know about this virus, and we are learning more about it every day. But this is our current understanding: If you are out for a run in your neighborhood or making a quick visit to the grocery store, it is highly unlikely that you would contract COVID-19 via your clothes or shoes. We don’t believe shoes or clothing are a significant source of transmission,” Dr. Vincent Hsu, MPH, a board-certified internal medicine, infectious diseases, and preventive medicine physician at AdventHealth in Orlando, told [name removed].

According to Hsu, there have been no documented cases of transmission of the novel coronavirus via clothing and shoes at this point.

COVID-19, the flu-like respiratory illness caused by the novel coronavirus, is spread by respiratory droplets. Coughing and sneezing by an infected individual in close proximity to another person are the most likely means of direct transmission.

However, we do know that the novel coronavirus is capable of surviving outside the human body on different surfaces, which can result in transmission if touched.

Depending on the type of surface, experts estimate that the virus can survive for just a few hours up to a few days.

While metal and plastic can provide a haven for the virus for up to 2 to 3 days, clothing is not considered a material conducive to its survival.

“Our best studies in this area are with influenza and other previously known viruses, but clothing in general is not thought to be the best incubator of viruses,” Dr. Kathleen Jordan, an infectious disease specialist and vice president at CommonSpirit Health, told [name removed].

Humidity and moisture play a significant environmental role in whether or not a virus can thrive. The nature of most cloth materials is not conducive to this.

“Clothing is usually more of a mesh than a hard surface, which could potentially aerate the environment more readily,” said Jordan.

Transfer of the virus via clothing is unlikely, but the experts interviewed by [name removed] agreed there are a few scenarios in which immediate laundering is a good idea.

When you should take extra precaution with clothes

If you are taking care of or frequently in close proximity to an individual with COVID-19, doing laundry often is an essential part of preventive hygiene. This includes, in particular, high risk individuals such as healthcare workers.

The average trip to the grocery store shouldn't necessitate doing the laundry as soon as you get home. However, if you haven't been able to keep a safe social distance from others or, even worse, someone has coughed or sneezed in your direct vicinity, washing those clothes would be a good idea.

But, in general, focusing on other areas of hygiene such as keeping hands clean and not touching your face is more important than laundering clothes.

"We do know that social distancing is our most effective means of controlling transmission. So going to the grocery store obviously is a break in our usual patterns of social distancing. To take extra precautions you would certainly use hand hygiene going in as well as going out and management of anything that could potentially have been touched or handled by other persons. Any hygiene you can add to that practice is additive," said Jordan.

When doing laundry at home, killing the virus shouldn't take any additional effort. Most household detergents are sufficient. For a more in-depth look, the EPA offers a full list of products known to be effective against SARS-CoV-2.

"Regular washing machines with regular soap and water is felt to be safe and effective," said Jordan.

What about shoes?

Shoes tend to be a lot dirtier than clothing just by their very nature. As such, they're more likely to carry bacteria and other contaminants into the home.

A new study published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggests that the novel coronavirus can live on the soles of shoes.

In the study, researchers took samples from the soles of shoes worn by members of the medical staff in the intensive care unit at a hospital in Wuhan, China.

They found that half the samples tested positive for SARS-CoV-2, the virus strain that causes COVID-19.

These findings have led researchers to suggest that the soles of medical staff shoes might function as carriers of the disease.

Nonetheless, experts agree that shoes are an unlikely source of transmission of the novel coronavirus in most cases. And that's because we already treat shoes how they should be treated.

"What we usually do with shoes is already protective. We don't put our shoes on the kitchen table. We don't put shoes in our mouths. They aren't high touch areas. So, our daily patterns already reflect our management of shoes as dirty objects," said Jordan.

But you can take additional safety measures to ensure that contaminants don't enter your home by cleaning off your shoes and either leaving them at the door or designating an area safely away from social areas of your home in which to leave shoes and other outerwear.

"Taking off your shoes and cleaning them before you enter your home (and leaving them in your garage, washroom, or porch) would also be advisable. This will prevent you from introducing virus into your home from a simple trip to the grocery store. Just make sure you clean them outside your home or apartment, and let them dry naturally," Dr. Robert Glatter, an emergency physician at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, told [name removed].

The bottom line

While concern has grown in recent weeks about the potential for different objects to transmit the virus, the simple fact is that direct transmission from person to person is still believed to be the primary form of exposure.

Therefore, continuing to maintain the CDC's recommended prevention and hygiene tips

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is still the best way to stay healthy.

“There is a minimal chance that [the novel coronavirus] can survive on your clothing or shoes and be transmitted to others. The bottom line is this: It’s person to person transmission, not clothing to person, or shoe to person transmission in any significant way,” said Glatter.