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Should I wash my clothes after I go outside to prevent coronavirus infection?

by Jonathan Lai, Updated: April 3, 2020



HEATHER KHALIFA / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Editor's Note

News about the coronavirus is changing quickly. The latest information can be found at [inquirer.com/coronavirus](https://www.inquirer.com/coronavirus)

You're allowed to go outside to get some exercise and fresh air, as well as for essential trips such as grocery shopping.

But what should you do when you get back inside? Strip everything and wash it? Bleach it? Light it all on fire and call it a loss?

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First, experts said, it's important to keep this in perspective: The real risk of infection comes from person-to-person contact and respiratory droplets. There is some theoretical risk that you could be infected through clothing, but it's small and can be minimized even further.

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That's why **there's been no recommendation that the general public wash clothes after being outside**, said John Zurlo, division director of infectious diseases at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia.

“We haven’t recommended anything like that,” he said. More important than focusing on clothing, he said, is to wash your hands when you come inside and not touch your face with dirty hands.

The coronavirus can survive on some surfaces, including [up to 24 hours on cardboard and three days on plastic and stainless steel](#). But levels of the virus drop quickly, and being detectable is not the same thing as being infectious.

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And **the virus tends to live for a shorter time on porous surfaces such as clothing**, said Megan Culler Freeman, a senior pediatric infectious diseases fellow at UPMC Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh whose Ph.D. work focused on coronaviruses.

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If you want to really reduce the risk, **it comes down to thinking about what your clothing has been exposed to**, she said.

“If you went to a store and leaned against surfaces, it is more likely that the clothing could be contaminated,” she said, “and I would recommend putting those clothes in the wash and changing into something clean for home.”

But just generally being outdoors, you’re probably safe, Freeman said.

“If you went for a run and didn’t interact with anyone else,” she said, “your clothes are unlikely to be contaminated with virus (though they may be smelly, so you might still wash them.)”

Suzanne Willard, associate dean of global health at Rutgers University’s School of Nursing, agreed.

You're OK if you've gone for a run or walk and not been around anyone else, she said. "It's the close contact things," she said, where you have to consider what to do with your clothes.

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As long as the risk is low — you're not a health-care worker, your clothes haven't been rubbing against outside surfaces or touching other people — "you don't need to sterilize everything as soon as you walk in the door," said Jayatri Das, chief bioscientist at the Franklin Institute.

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There have been about 1,650,200 confirmed cases and 100,300 deaths globally. In the United States, there have been about 475,700 confirmed cases and 17,900 deaths.

What are the symptoms?

Like other respiratory infections, symptoms of coronavirus can include fever, cough, and difficulty breathing. Here is an [in-depth description](#).

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You can change clothes after coming inside if you want, but there's no need to wash them immediately, said Aline M. Holmes, a clinical professor at the Rutgers University School of Nursing.

Holmes doesn't change clothes when she comes inside, she said, because she doesn't need to.


"I go outside once or twice a week to the grocery store and I maintain six feet [of distance from other people]," she said. "I don't come in and strip and wash them."

Keep in mind that the virus likely will not survive for very long on clothes.

But if you're feeling extra cautious, when it's time to do laundry, **wash clothes with hot water and soap**, which also helps destroy the virus. Throwing those clothes in the dryer, where temperatures really get high, will help get rid of any remaining virus, Das said.

Afterward, you can disinfect the laundry bin or bag if you want.

But what you definitely should do, the experts said, is the same thing you should be doing often anyway. You knew it was coming: **Wash your hands. With soap. For 20 seconds.**



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