



Police officers and soldiers check passengers leaving from Milan's main train station in Italy on March 9, 2020. Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte signed a quarantine decree early March 8 for the country's northern region in an attempt to halt the spread of the novel coronavirus. (Claudio Furlan/LaPresse via AP)

CPJ Safety Advisory: Covering the coronavirus outbreak

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The COVID-19 virus (also known as novel coronavirus) is now present across every continent, excluding Antarctica, with confirmed cases and ongoing transmission in over 100 countries, according to data from the World Health Organization (WHO).

The WHO declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 31, 2020, and raised its global risk assessment from "high" to "very high" on February 28, 2020, according to news reports.

An increasing number of countries have imposed travel restrictions on certain nationalities, according to Trip.com, while certain heavily affected areas have been locked down entirely, as reported by the BBC. A regularly updated WHO map showing the global distribution of cases can be seen here.

As the situation evolves and new information emerges, updated health advice and outbreak news will be issued by the relevant authorities. To keep up-to-date, journalists covering the outbreak should monitor the WHO, the U.S.-based Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Public Health England (PHE).

Journalists who are planning to cover the COVID-19 outbreak should consider the following safety information:

Pre-Assignment

- According to the CDC, older people and individuals with chronic health conditions are considered high risk. If you fall into this high risk category, you should consider not participating in the assignment if the risk of exposure is significant
- Research the latest security situation in your destination. To date there have been isolated violent incidents in Cyprus, Reunion and Ukraine, with ongoing protests in both Iraq and Hong Kong being exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak
- There have been incidents of racist attacks against certain nationalities, according to BuzzFeed, a factor to consider when selecting staff for any assignment. Increased levels of hostility and prejudice should also be taken into account
- Regularly check the status of any event you might be attending, taking into account that countries like France and Switzerland have banned public gatherings of more than one thousand people
- Be aware of misinformation, something that the WHO has specifically warned about and that the BBC has highlighted
- Pay attention to your digital security, noting that scammers and hackers are reportedly targeting individuals with phishing emails related to COVID-19, according to Norton, a cyber safety company
- Before travelling to an affected country, ensure all relevant vaccinations and disease prophylaxis are up-to-date for your

destination. Consider getting the flu vaccine to prevent confusion over any symptoms you may develop

- Discuss what plans your management team has in place to assist and support you should you fall ill while on assignment
- Consider what supplies you may need to take with you. Shortages of certain items have been reported along with incidents of panic buying, including face masks, hand sanitizers, soap, canned food and toilet paper
- Consider the potential psychological impact of reporting from an area affected by COVID-19, especially if reporting from a medical or isolation facility, or quarantine zone. A useful resource for media workers covering traumatic situations can be found via the DART Center for Journalism and Trauma
- Family members may be concerned and stressed about such assignments. Have a discussion with them about the risks and their concerns. If necessary, set up a conversation between family members and your organization's medical advisers. Be aware that some organizations and employers have increased their evacuation preparedness level for any personnel based in affected countries

Travel Planning

- Ensure you have a contingency plan in place. Urban centers and/or entire regions can be locked down and quarantined with little or no notice, as seen recently in parts of northern Italy and Hubei province in China
- Do not travel if you are sick. Many international and regional airports, as well as other transportation hubs, have implemented health screening measures. Travellers may face testing and enforced quarantine on arrival
- Consider purchasing fully refundable flight tickets. COVID-19 is causing significant financial distress for many airlines, according to IATA, and is said to have contributed to the recent collapse of Europe's biggest regional airline FlyBe
- Be aware that global travel options have reduced due to airlines cancelling flights to/from certain destinations in Italy, China, Singapore, South Korea, and Hong Kong. Further cancellations are likely if cases of COVID-19 increase significantly in other countries

- Check your travel insurance policy. Some governments have issued varying levels of travel advice and alerts against heading to countries such as China, Italy, Iran and South Korea. This includes the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the U.S. State Department, and the French Affaires Etrangeres
- Check on the latest visa situation for your destination. Visas for certain nationalities have been suspended by countries such as Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Vietnam and Mozambique, among others
- Be aware that some countries have imposed travel bans, enforced quarantine and/or 14 days health monitoring on arrival for certain nationalities. Such countries include Turkey, Japan, Australia, Turkmenistan, Singapore, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania and Russia, among others
- Check if your destination country requires a medical certificate to prove you are COVID-19 free. Examples can be seen here
- Maintain flexible itineraries and allow additional time at airports around the world, particularly across much of Asia and the Middle East, taking into account health screening measures and temperature check points. The same applies at some railway stations, ports/docks, and long-haul bus stations
- Keep up to date with any changes to your point of arrival. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and Russia will only allow certain nationalities to enter at particular airports and terminals
- Be alert to land borders closing with little or no notice. Recent examples include Russia and Mongolia closing their borders with China. Other countries have done so with Iran and Cameroon, whilst Israel has closed its borders with Egypt, Syria and Lebanon
- Continually monitor local sources for news of any inner-city movement restrictions within the country you're visiting
- If visiting a health facility, a quarantine zone, animal markets and/or a farm, enquire about the hygiene measures that are in place. If in any doubt do not visit

Avoiding Infection

Standard recommendations to avoid infection include:

- Avoid close contact with anybody showing symptoms of respiratory illness, such as coughing and sneezing. Always place your hand over your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing
- Wash your hands regularly with hot water and soap. Use anti-bacterial gel or wipes if hot water and soap is not available, but always follow this up with a hot water and soap wash as soon as possible
- Use protective gloves if working in or visiting an infected site such as a medical treatment facility. Other medical personal protective equipment (PPE) such as a bodysuit and full face mask may also be necessary
- Only consume cooked meat and eggs
- Do not visit wet markets or farms in an affected area. Avoid direct contact with animals (live or dead) and their environment. Do not touch surfaces that may be contaminated with animal droppings
- If you are operating in a health facility, market, or farm, never place your equipment on the floor. Always decontaminate equipment with fast acting antimicrobial wipes such as Meliseptol, followed by thorough disinfection
- If working in an affected health facility, market, or farm, use disposable footwear or use waterproof overshoes, both of which must be wiped/rinsed off as soon as you exit the location. If using waterproof overshoes, they should be disposed of before leaving the scene. Always follow local guidance
- Avoid proximity to and/or entering an animal pen, or the cage of large/unpredictable animals. In the event that you are bitten by an animal seek medical advice as soon as possible
- Never eat or drink while touching animals, or in the proximity of a market or farm
- Always ensure your hands are washed thoroughly with hot water and soap before, during and after leaving an affected area
- If you develop symptoms, especially fever or shortness of breath, consider how you will seek medical treatment. Some government health bodies may recommend self-quarantine to prevent the infection of others. If you are in a heavily infected country, you may risk encountering COVID-19 infected patients at crowded treatment centers, therefore increasing your chances of exposure.
- Always follow the local health authorities guidance and instructions

Face Masks

The CDC and WHO are in agreement that it is not necessary for people without symptoms to wear masks, unless you are told to by the local authorities; you are in a high-risk area such as a hospital; or you are taking care of a person with suspected COVID-19 infection. If you do wear a mask you should follow this advice:

- If necessary, an N95 mask (or FFP2 / FFP3) is recommended over a standard 'surgical' mask
- Ensure that the mask fits securely over the bridge of the nose and chin, minimizing gaps in the fit. Ensure facial hair is removed and maintained
- Avoid touching the mask, and only remove it by using the straps. Never touch the front
- Always wash hands with soap and hot water, or with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer (minimum 60 percent alcohol) after removing the mask
- Replace the mask with a new, clean dry mask as soon as it becomes damp/humid
- Never reuse masks, and always dispose of used masks immediately into a sealed bag
- Remember that use of a mask is only one part of personal protection. Not touching your mouth, nose, and eyes and regularly washing your hands are strongly recommended
- Cotton/gauze masks are not recommended under any circumstances
- Be aware that face masks may be in short supply and/or subject to sharp price increases, depending on the location

Post-Assignment

- Monitor your personal health after leaving an affected country or specific location (e.g. health facility, market, or farm). Seek medical attention if you develop respiratory symptoms within 14 days of return, informing the health service prior to attendance about the recent travel/risk of exposure
- Inform your employer and management team as soon as possible if you develop symptoms, and be aware that you may be required to

self-isolate. Discuss with your employer the possibility and feasibility of remote working for a period of time on return

- If you do need to self-isolate, make a plan regarding shopping for supplies and caring for any dependents. You should not use public transport or taxis until at least 14 days after your return from a heavily infected country
- Monitor the latest information on COVID-19, as well as any quarantine and isolation procedures being implemented at both your origin and your destination

CPJ's online Safety Kit provides journalists and newsrooms with basic safety information on physical, digital, and psychological safety resources and tools, including on covering civil unrest and elections.

Short URL:

<https://cpj.org/x/8246>

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