

What to Do and What Not to Do When There is an Epidemic or a Threat of an Epidemic

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In today's world of mass media, frequent news coverage can cause even isolated cases of an epidemic to become a major concern. The important thing to remember when hearing these news stories is that you should not panic. You need to look at the facts and find out if you are at risk. For example, the Ebola epidemic is a major public health threat to populations in certain areas of the globe, but is less of a threat in the United States. The United States' health system is more advanced than many of those in Africa. The United States' health care officials respond quickly to get threats and issues under control.¹ Furthermore, compared to the flu, Ebola is not as easy to spread. Ebola spreads through direct contact with body fluids.¹ Understanding these facts can help ease your fears.

Although knowing facts can help alleviate fears, it is always wise to stay informed and prepared. During an outbreak of flu, Ebola or other contagious illness, media reports help raise awareness of what people can do to keep themselves and their family members healthy. During these times, and during flu season every year, there are certain things you should do and should not do. Below are some tips to help you know what to DO and what NOT to do, along with some resources you can use to stay informed of epidemic activity.

DO...

- **Get the facts and stay calm.** A calm mind is a clearer mind.
- **Get your regular flu vaccination (shot or flu spray),** unless your doctor says otherwise. This applies to you and everyone in your home who is six months of age or older.² The flu is a common epidemic and can be dangerous. People who get a flu vaccination reduce their risk for illness, hospitalizations and death caused by the flu.²
- **Make a plan.** A disaster plan can assist in any situation, including an epidemic.³
 - Find out how your community, including public health authorities and first responders, will warn you of any potential safety issues.
 - Keep the phone number to your doctor and closest urgent care clinic in a place where everyone in your home can see it.
 - Talk to your family about what to do if someone in the household has a contagious illness.
 - Make it a habit to check in on elderly neighbors and relatives during an epidemic or flu season. A simple phone call can save a life.
- **Use safe health practices.**⁴
 - Seek mental health assistance from a professional if you experience stress that causes a change in your sleep habits or daily routine or if you have anxiety or depression.
 - Wash your hands often with soap and warm water. If soap and water is not available, use hand-washing products that are made with alcohol.
 - Keep your home clean. Make a solution with one cup bleach to five gallons of water to sanitize common surfaces and doorknobs.
 - Keep up with any treatment plan you have in place for physical or mental health.

- If you have a chronic illness, contact your doctor if you get sick. There may be special steps you need to take to recover from your sickness and minimize the symptoms of your chronic condition.
- Keep open cuts and wounds clean and covered.
- **Take care of your immune system.**⁵
 - Get enough sleep. According to the National Institutes of Health, preschoolers should get 11 to 12 hours of sleep a day, school-aged children should get 10 hours, teens should get 9 to 10 hours, and adults of all ages should get 7 to 8 hours.⁶
 - Drink plenty of water.
 - Get recommended annual medical screenings.
 - Talk to your doctor about a healthy diet, what vitamins you should take, and a safe exercise plan that will work for you.
- **Prepare an emergency kit.*** Keep this kit at home in case you become sick and cannot leave your house. This is also a good idea because the kit can help during severe weather situations. At a minimum, your kit should contain:^{7,8}
 - One gallon of water per person per day for up to three days.
 - A non-perishable food supply for each person in the house for at least three days.
 - A manual can opener.
 - A first aid kit. This kit should contain over-the-counter fever reducers and stomach and digestive aids that can assist with an upset stomach and diarrhea relief.
 - Garbage bags and plastic ties.
 - Bleach or wipes with bleach for sanitation.
 - A seven-day supply of medication and other medical supplies, such as hearing aids with extra batteries, glasses, contact lenses, syringes or a cane.
 - Personal hygiene items.
 - Insurance policy information (including health insurance).
 - Emergency contact information.
 - Flashlights and extra batteries.
 - Supplies for your pets.

Do NOT...

- Panic.
- Touch your face unless you have clean hands and have not touched common surfaces. Certain germs can get into your eyes, nose, and mouth from surfaces you touch.⁹
- Expose others by going out into the community or to work when you are sick.
- Leave used tissues around. Once you use a tissue, throw it away.
- Drink from someone else's drink or eat off of food someone already bit into.
- Smoke or drink excess amounts of alcohol. These activities are harmful to the immune system.⁵

In summary, during an epidemic of any kind, do not panic, get the facts, make a plan, and make good health choices. These tips can benefit your physical and mental health.

Epidemic Resources

- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) 



- [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#)
- [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Public Health Emergency site](#)
- Your local Department of Health
 - If you do not know how to locate your local health department, the CDC has a search function that will get you to [your state's Department of Health website](#)

*For more information on how to build an emergency kit, refer to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) and [Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\)](#) websites.

Sources:

- 1 The White House (2014). Fact sheet: U.S. response to the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. Retrieved from <http://www.whitehouse.gov>
- 2 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2014). Vaccine & vaccine safety. Retrieved from <http://www.flu.gov>
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- 4 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014). Fact sheet: Prevent illness. Retrieved from <http://emergency.cdc.gov>
- 5 Harvard Medical School (2014). How to boost your immune system. Retrieved from <http://www.health.harvard.edu>
- 6 National Institutes of Health (2012). How much sleep is enough? Retrieved from <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov>
- 7 Federal Emergency Management Agency (2014). Basic disaster supplies kit. Retrieved from <http://www.ready.gov/kit>
- 8 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014). Gather emergency supplies. Retrieved from <http://emergency.cdc.gov>
- 9 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012). Personal NPIs – Everyday preventative actions. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov>

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