Think you have COVID-19 symptoms? Here's what to do

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Coronavirus is officially a pandemic, and Americans are adopting "social distancing" to prevent a surge in potential illnesses and death.

So, what if *you* run a fever or experience shortness of breath? Should that send you running to an emergency room?

Not necessarily, since most coronavirus cases are mild and there's no need to panic, experts note.

The first thing to do is match your symptoms to those experienced by COVID-19 patients, said Dr. William Jaquis, president of the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP).

Fever, a dry cough and shortness of breath are the three most common symptoms, Jaquis said.

Headaches, body aches, sore throat and fatigue sometimes occur but are more often associated with the flu, medical experts say. A runny nose rarely occurs with COVID-19, and sneezing is not a symptom of the virus.

Next, assess the severity of your symptoms. Don't just rush to the hospital.

If you can still breathe reasonably well or your fever responds to over-the-counter remedies like acetaminophen (Tylenol), you should call your family doctor to discuss your best options for care, experts say.

According to Dr. Aimee Moulin, an emergency medicine physician with the University of California, Davis, "If your symptoms are mild, you can reach out to your primary care physician, and if you feel like you can manage at home, folks are advised to self-quarantine."

Don't just head to your doctor's office before calling first. Set up an appointment so they can meet you in the parking lot, give you a face mask, and bring you into the office by a route that will expose the fewest people to illness.

"The official suggestion is that face masks don't protect you from others," Jaquis said. "They protect others from you."

If possible, your doctor will test you for the coronavirus. The Trump administration announced a package of initiatives on Friday to increase the number of testing kits and to provide drive-through testing sites in the parking lots of retailers—like Walmart, Walgreens and CVS—in hard-hit areas around the country. At these testing sites, people will be able to drive up and get throat and nose swabs that will then be sent to labs for testing.

And in a press briefing late Monday, officials said those and other efforts are bearing fruit.

Adm. Brett Giroir, who is leading the Department of Health and Human Services' efforts in coordinating coronavirus testing, said that a rollout of test kits

has entered "a new phase," as commercial labs with highly efficient, automated systems ramp up their services.

Giroir said 1 million tests are now available, 2 million more should come on stream over the next week, and 5 million more a week later.

People who don't have a primary care doctor should reach out to their local health department for guidance on their symptoms and testing, Jaquis said. Local public health officials also should be able to tell you about other options for testing in your area.

The current turnaround time for a COVID-19 test is two days, Moulin said.

At this point, people who don't have symptoms are not being tested, she added.

People who are sick enough to need to go to the hospital—for example, they cannot readily draw breath or feel like they are going to pass out—should either call 911 or visit their closest emergency department, ACEP recommends.

Those in high-risk groups—seniors and people with compromised immune systems—also should consider heading to the emergency department, Moulin said.

"Those are the people we are advising to visit their emergency department if they need to," Moulin said.

There is no cure for coronavirus. People who are sick at home should monitor their symptoms, get rest and stay hydrated, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The best way to fight coronavirus is to never get infected in the first place. According to experts, that's best done by frequent hand washing, avoiding people who are sick, and "social distancing," or avoiding large groups. On Monday, an update to new White House guidelines urged that all Americans avoid gatherings of 10 or more people for the next 15 days.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about COVID-19.