

coronavirus

A family of viruses, some of which cause disease in people and animals, named for crownlike spikes on their surfaces.

The viruses can cause the common cold or more severe diseases such as *SARS* (severe acute respiratory syndrome), *MERS* (Middle East respiratory syndrome) and *COVID-19*, the latter of which first appeared in late 2019 in Wuhan, China.

As of March 2020, referring to simply *the coronavirus* is acceptable on first reference in stories about COVID-19. While the phrasing incorrectly implies there is only one coronavirus, it is clear in this context. Also acceptable on first reference: *the new coronavirus*; *the new virus*; *COVID-19*.

In stories, do not refer simply to *coronavirus* without the article *the*. Not: *She is concerned about coronavirus*. Omitting *the* is acceptable in headlines and in uses such as: *He said coronavirus concerns are increasing*.

Passages and stories focusing on the science of the disease require sharper distinctions.

COVID-19, which stands for *coronavirus disease 2019*, is caused by a virus named *SARS-CoV-2*. When referring specifically to the virus, *the COVID-19 virus* and *the virus that causes COVID-19* are acceptable. But, because *COVID-19* is the name of the disease, not the virus, it is not accurate to write *a new virus called COVID-19*.

SARS is acceptable on first reference for the disease first identified in Asia in 2003. Spell out *severe acute respiratory syndrome* later in the story.

MERS is acceptable on first reference. Spell out *Middle East respiratory syndrome* later in the story.

Symptoms of COVID-19 can include fever, cough and breathing trouble. Most develop only mild symptoms. But some people, usually those with other medical complications, develop more severe symptoms, including pneumonia, which can be fatal.

Do not exaggerate the risks presented by any of the three diseases by routinely referring to them as *deadly*, *fatal* or the like.

anti-

Hyphenate most, but don't hyphenate words that have specific meanings of their own. For example: *antibiotic, antibody, antidote, antiseptic*.

antiseptic, disinfectant

Antiseptics, such as hand sanitizers, are used to kill germs on living things. *Disinfectants*, such as bleach, are used on inanimate things, such as countertops and handrails. The adjective is *disinfectant*, not *disinfecting*.

asymptomatic

Avoid this medical jargon; use *no symptoms, without symptoms* or the like.

bandanna

cancel, canceled, canceling, cancellation

CARES Act

Avoid using this term unless in a direct quotation in reference to the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act. Instead, use phrasing such as *the coronavirus relief bill, the coronavirus aid bill, the coronavirus rescue package*, etc., for the U.S. government's \$2.2 trillion package to help businesses, workers and a health care system staggered by the coronavirus. Do not refer to it as *a stimulus, a stimulus package*, etc. The measure was passed to replace money lost in the collapse of the economy, rather than to stimulate demand.

cases

People should not be referred to as cases. Correct: *Fifty people tested positive for the virus. Fifty cases of the virus were reported.* Incorrect: *Fifty cases tested positive for the virus. Incorrect and redundant: 50 positive cases.*

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Located in Atlanta, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. On first reference, use *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. Precede with *national, federal* or *U.S.* if needed for clarity. *CDC* is acceptable on second reference and takes a singular verb.

contagious

data

The word typically takes singular verbs and pronouns when writing for general audiences and in data journalism contexts: *The data is sound.* In scientific and academic writing, plural verbs and pronouns are preferred.

Use *databank* and *database*, but *data processing* (n. and adj.) and *data center*.

death, die

Don't use euphemisms like *passed on* or *passed away* except in a direct quote.

diseases

Do not capitalize diseases such as *cancer, emphysema, leukemia, hepatitis*, etc., but do capitalize the shorthand COVID-19, MERS, SARS. When a disease is known by the name of a person or geographical area identified with it, capitalize only the proper noun element: *Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, Ebola virus*, etc.

Avoid such expressions as: *He is battling COVID-19. She is a stroke victim*. Use neutral, precise descriptions: *He has stomach cancer. She had a stroke*.

distances, time periods

Use numerals for distances: *Social distancing includes staying 6 feet away from other people*.

Spell out numbers under 10 when referring to days, weeks, months, years: *six months*.

distance learning (n., adj.)

Schools are turning to distance learning. He is taking a distance learning class.

drive-thru

epidemic, pandemic

An *epidemic* is the rapid spreading of disease in a certain population or region; a *pandemic* is an *epidemic* that has spread worldwide. Follow declarations of public health officials. On March 11, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. Do not write *global pandemic*, which is redundant.

front line (n.) front-line (adj.)

good Samaritan

hand-washing

health care

home schooling (n.) home-schooler (n.) home-school (v.) home-schooled (adj.)

hot spot

incubation period

Time between infection and the appearance of signs or symptoms of an illness. The incubation period for the new virus is thought to be up to two weeks.

isolation, quarantine

According to the CDC: Isolation is separating sick people from healthy people to prevent spread of disease. For example, people believed to have COVID-19 or to have been exposed to the coronavirus are put in isolation in hospitals or are asked to practice *self-isolation*. Quarantine separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick.

lock down (v.), lockdown (n., adj.)

Spell out what is meant, because people's definitions and interpretations vary.

masks, respirators, ventilators

An *N95 mask* is a specific type of tight-fitting, cup-shaped face mask that covers the nose and mouth, filters the air, and is used by workers in such settings as construction and health care. They are technically *respirators*, but the preferred term is *masks* to avoid confusion with *ventilators*. *Respirators* like the N95 are distinct from *surgical masks*, which also cover the nose and mouth but fit loosely. A *ventilator* is a machine that helps people breathe; *breathing machine* is acceptable.

medical job titles

Avoid cumbersome or unfamiliar medical or scientific titles when possible. Describe someone's expertise instead. *Public health researcher* or *researcher* instead of *epidemiologist*. *Virus expert* instead of *virologist*. *Lung specialist* instead of *pulmonologist*. Use the proper job title if it is a government position: *state Epidemiologist Mira Sanchez*.

National Institutes of Health

This agency within the Department of Health and Human Services is the principal biomedical research arm of the federal government. *NIH* is acceptable on second reference. There are 27 institutes or centers, including the National Cancer Institute, the National Institute on Drug Abuse and the National Institute of Mental Health.

nonessential

outbreak

A sudden rise in cases of a disease in a particular place. For disease references, reserve for larger numbers of an illness, not a few cases.

patient

Implies someone is being or has been treated by a medical professional. The vast majority of people with the virus are not hospitalized, and some may not seek out care, so avoid using *patients* to refer to all people with the virus.

patient zero

Unscientific term that refers to the first person to get a disease or spread it to a new area. It is potentially misleading or defamatory and best confined to quoted material. If used in a quotation, use lowercase and quotation marks around the term itself: *"It's clear that 'patient zero' is a myth," the doctor said.*

percent, percentage, percentage points

Use the % sign when paired with a numeral, with no space, in most cases: *The S&P 500 future contract was down 3.2% and the future for the Dow dropped 3.3%.*

In casual uses, use words rather than figures and numbers: *She said he has a zero percent chance of winning.*

At the start of a sentence: Try to avoid this construction. If it's necessary to start a sentence with a percentage, spell out both: *Eighty-nine percent of sentences don't have to begin with a number.*

Constructions with the % sign take a singular verb when standing alone or when a singular word follows an of construction: *The teacher said 60% was a failing grade. He said 50% of the membership was there.*

It takes a plural verb when a plural word follows an of construction: *He said 50% of the members were there.*

Use decimals, not fractions, in percentages: *Her mortgage rate is 4.5%.*

For a range, *12% to 15%*, *12%-15%* and *between 12% and 15%* are all acceptable.

Use *percentage*, rather than *percent*, when not paired with a number: *The percentage of people agreeing is small.*

Be careful not to confuse *percent* with *percentage point*. A change from 10% to 13% is a rise of 3 percentage points. This is not equal to a 3% change; rather, it's a 30% increase.

Usage: *Republicans passed a 0.25 percentage point tax cut.* Not: *Republicans passed a 0.25 percentage points tax cut* or *Republicans passed a tax cut of 0.25 of a percentage point.*

personal protective equipment

Equipment worn to minimize exposure to hazards that cause serious injuries and illnesses. Don't use *PPE*. If necessary to use *PPE* in a direct quotation, spell it out later and explain the term.

preventive

quarantine

Restricting movement of healthy people who may have been exposed to an infection to see if they become ill. For example, the passengers on the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Japan were quarantined.

reopen

risk

Relative risk is the risk of something happening to one group compared with the risk of it happening to another. This is often expressed in a fraction or ratio in scientific studies. If there is no difference, the ratio is 1. For example, if a study finds that the relative risk of a group of smokers getting a disease is 1.5 compared with a group of nonsmokers, it means the smokers are 1.5 times — or 50% — more likely to develop the disease. But it doesn't say how likely it is that either group gets the disease. For that, you need absolute risk.

Absolute risk is the risk of something happening at all. For example, the nonsmoking group in the above example may have had a 4 in 100 chance of getting the disease, while the smokers had a 6 in 100 chance of getting a disease. Another example: A drug that extends life by 50% (a relative risk) sounds impressive, but that might mean living six months on average on a treatment versus four months without. Readers deserve both views of the results.

shelter in place (v.), shelter-in-place (adj.)

The governor urged residents to shelter in place. Authorities issued a shelter-in-place order. Spell out what is meant, because people's definitions and interpretations vary.

stay at home (v.), stay-at-home (adj.)

shutdown (n.), shut down (v.)

social distancing, socially distancing

No quote marks, no hyphen: *The CDC is urging social distancing. The parents are taking social distancing precautions. They've been socially distancing themselves.* Generally, social distancing involves measures to restrict when and where people can gather. The goal is to stop or slow the spread of infectious diseases. Measures can include limiting the number of people who can gather, staying 6 feet away from others, closing schools, asking people to work at home, canceling events, limiting or shutting down public transportation, etc.

No need to define if the meaning is clear from the context; the term has quickly become widely used and understood. If specific steps are a focus, spell out what those steps are.

telecommute, telecommuting, telecommuter

teleconference, teleconferencing

telemedicine

travel, traveled, traveling, traveler

underlying conditions, preexisting conditions

Terms like *existing health conditions* or *other health problems* are preferred over *underlying conditions* to describe issues that contributed to a COVID-19 illness or death. No hyphen in *preexisting condition*, a term usually used in the context of health insurance.

videoconference, videoconferencing; video chat

virus's

The singular possessive form of virus. Not virus'. See [possessives](#).

World Health Organization

The specialized health agency of the United Nations and is based in Geneva. It sets internationally accepted guidelines for treating diseases and coordinates responses to disease outbreaks globally. On second reference, *the WHO* and *WHO* are both acceptable.