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Column: Stockpiling sanitizer, toilet paper is understandable. But is it rational?



Consumers worldwide have responded to coronavirus fears by stockpiling food, water, hand sanitizer, toilet paper and more. Should they? (John Roark / Idaho Post-Register)

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MARCH 5, 2020
5 AM



Judy Parra, office manager of the Los Angeles chapter of the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, called Costco this week about purchasing about a dozen cases of bottled water for an upcoming event.

Costco's response: Sorry, all sold out.

"They said they hoped to have more water in stock the next morning," Parra recalled. "But they warned that this would probably sell out immediately as well."

It's not just water. Coronavirus fears have prompted consumers nationwide and around the world to snatch up as much hand sanitizer, toilet paper, cleaning products and other goods as they can cram into a shopping cart.

Shelves at many leading retailers are now empty — despite assurances from the business world that most of these products are not in short supply and will be readily available in coming months.

Experts in consumer behavior say a surge in panic buying comes as no surprise amid a looming global pandemic.

"Our choices are influenced by what we think and feel at the moment," said Ravi Dhar, a marketing professor at Yale University and director of the Center for Customer Insights.

With coronavirus stories dominating the media, he told me, "people are responding in ways they respond to other uncertainties. Like in an impending hurricane, they are stocking up on canned goods, toilet paper, etc."

This is, of course, perfectly understandable.

But is it rational?

“It would not be irrational to do so when risk is largely unknown,” Dhar replied.

“Stories about scarcity feed into the frenzy.”

And that’s the situation in a nutshell. Consumers have more questions than answers.

As a result, they’re erring on the side of caution and stockpiling — just in case.

The recent run on hand sanitizer is a perfect example. [Good luck finding any.](#)

Health authorities say products such as Purell are good at killing nasty little germs, which is why consumers quickly grabbed as much as they could carry.

It turns out, though, that good old-fashioned hand washing is even better.

“Soap and water [are more effective](#) than hand sanitizers at removing certain kinds of germs,” says the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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“Although alcohol-based hand sanitizers can inactivate many types of microbes very effectively when used correctly, people may not use a large enough volume of the sanitizers or may wipe it off before it has dried,” it says.

Moreover, hand sanitizers lose their punch with hands that become greasy or soiled in everyday settings, “such as after people handle food, play sports, work in the garden, or go camping or fishing,” the CDC observes.

“Handwashing with soap and water is recommended in such circumstances.”

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The hoarding of toilet paper might sound silly at first, until you remember that the

coronavirus can lead to being quarantined for two weeks.

Yeah, I'd want plenty of TP on hand. I'd also want a decent stock of food, some good books and a paid-up Netflix subscription.

Catherine Belling, an associate professor of medical education at Northwestern University, likened such purchases to how consumers might react to news of a zombie apocalypse.

"You do what you can," she said. "It might not make a lot of sense, but it provides a feeling of at least doing something."

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Shortages of toilet paper and bottled water represent what may be a bigger hazard to consumers than the coronavirus: The self-fulfilling prophecy.

In other words, the fear of a shortage is what creates the shortage.

Market researcher Nielsen said [in a new report](#) that concern about the coronavirus has prompted many consumers to create "pandemic pantries."

It said sales of hand sanitizers soared by 73% in dollar value in the four weeks ending Feb. 22, compared with the same period in 2019. Sales of face masks jumped by 319%, aerosol disinfectants rose 47% and thermometers increased 32%.

A worry that cow's milk could be hard to find caused sales of easily stored oat milk to skyrocket by 305%, Nielsen found.

"We expect the rush to stock up to have an almost immediate impact on supply chains for manufacturers of the most sought-after goods," the company's researchers concluded.

Not surprisingly, this storming of store aisles — both in the real world and online — has resulted in reports of price gouging by some money-hungry merchants.

Amazon said this week it had removed more than a million products from its site because of unduly high prices or misleading claims.

“There is no place for price gouging on Amazon,” the company said, blaming “bad actors” for “attempting to artificially raise prices on basic-need products during a global health crisis.”

Similar crackdowns were announced by Walmart, Ebay and Etsy.

Los Angeles City Attorney Mike Feuer [announced Wednesday](#) that “it is now illegal for any consumer good or medical supply to be sold for more than 10% higher than it was before the emergency was declared.”

Yet amid this flurry of retail activity, it’s important to note that there’s nothing wrong with playing it safe. Take prescription medicine and medical supplies.

I [reported the other day](#) that because most of the active ingredients in prescription drugs come from China and India, it’s highly possible that shortages could result because of factory closures.

Stephen Hahn, commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, said last week [at least one drug](#) is now in short supply because an active ingredient is unavailable. He didn’t identify the drug or the ingredient, saying only that “this shortage is related to a site affected by coronavirus.”

Many people (myself included) don’t want to risk a situation where they can’t get their meds. So the prudent move is to buy first, ask questions later.

While economists are correct when they call such purchases panic buying, at the end of

the day it's all about what helps you sleep at night.

If a pantry full of toilet paper or oat milk puts your mind at ease, that's sufficient justification for stockpiling.

Yale's Dhar said it's important to many consumers to maintain a feeling of being in control of their lives. The impulse to hoard reflects that.

"When people feel they do not have control over a risk, the emotional response is even more amplified," Dhar said.

Fair enough. However, let's also keep our cool — and think things through.

Face masks, for instance. Consumers snapping up all available supplies has created shortages of masks for the people who need them most: healthcare and social workers.

Keep a few masks on hand if you must. Don't make it tougher for others to do their job and keep people safe.

The coronavirus is scary. But health officials insist the vast majority of people who contract it will experience no more than the equivalent of a bad cold.

And a daily regimen of regular hand washing will greatly improve your chances of staying healthy.

So buy what you need to buy. Keep yourself and your loved ones safe.

Freaking out, on the other hand, doesn't help.



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