



# Coronavirus fears spark 'panic buying' of toilet paper, water, hand sanitizer. Here's why we all need to calm down

**Jessica Guynn, Mike Snider and Kelly Tyko** | USA TODAY

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*Corrections & Clarifications: An earlier version of this story misidentified the outbreak of coronavirus as a pandemic.*

Keep calm and stop hoarding. The spread of coronavirus in the U.S. won't wipe out our toilet paper supply. Or supplies of hand sanitizer, bottled water and ramen.

That is, unless the frenzied stampedes for hand sanitizer and bottled water continue at their current pace.

Anticipating a potential quarantine, shoppers ran out this weekend to buy food, water and other staples so they could avoid exposing themselves and their families. Others, alarmed by the rising death count and number of confirmed cases in the U.S., went on impulsive buying binges, stripping store shelves of toilet paper and cleaning supplies. Soon, hand sanitizer was nearly impossible to find in some places.

Online stores were hit hard, too, and not just Amazon.com. At the top of the Kroger app Monday was an alert limiting the number of sanitization and cold and flu-related products to five of each per order. The Costco and

Target websites listed all kinds of staples including Clorox Disinfecting Wipes and all-purpose cleaner as "out of stock."

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**Was it coronavirus?:** Steve Wozniak says he doesn't know if he and his wife were infected

"Panic buying is a self-fulfilling prophecy," says Karan Girotra, professor of operations at Cornell University. "If everyone thinks things are going to run out, they go and buy out things and they do run out."

No question the outbreak, which continues to spread rapidly in South Korea, Japan and Europe, is testing complex global supply chains that tend to run lean.

Medical devices and equipment and pharmaceutical products – and the raw materials to make them – are at greatest risk as demand for face masks and drugs to combat the virus rises.

But consumer hoarding is to blame for some shortages – and for critical supplies not reaching the people who need them. Shoppers at low risk buying up protective gear have left too few face masks for medical professionals and workers who have frequent interaction with the public, such as taxi and bus drivers or retail clerks, Girotra says.

Supply chain experts say to stop worrying about hoarding basic necessities beyond having on hand the recommended 14-day emergency supply of food and necessities.

Perishable food such as fruits and vegetables are unlikely to be limited in the short term. Supplies of imported frozen meat and fish are more at risk but were already curbed by trade sanctions.

Packaged goods such as cereal and toothpaste and dry goods won't be affected in the near term, either. For items that are now in shorter supply, such as hand sanitizer, plenty of substitutes exist such as soap. Some people

are even making their own.

"Panic is the biggest enemy," Girotra says.

Last week, Anna Sequoia, 74, of Glen Cove, New York, made several stops in search of paper masks – no luck on those – and Purell hand sanitizer – "extremely hard to find" or sold out. She was able to fill prescriptions and pick up over-the-counter medicine and vitamins, dog and cat food, cat litter, dry beans, pasta, frozen fruit, and paper goods. But she and her husband were floored by the crush of humanity on a visit to Costco on Sunday morning.

"I haven't seen it like that, even before Thanksgiving or Christmas," Sequoia said. "There was an air of aggressive competition even before we got into the store. People were pushing carts into each other. Almost no courtesy. Virtually every cart on the way out had Clorox wipes in it. The carts were LOADED."

The panic buying, Sequoia said, was "pretty disconcerting."



Stores across the country are selling out of toilet paper or have limited supplies because of fears of the coronavirus.

Kelly Tyko, USA TODAY

Even with images of all those empty shelves flooding social media feeds, supply chain experts urged people to stop, well, freaking out.

"We don't have a shortage of toilet paper in this country. We have plenty of toilet paper to go around," said Per Hong, a senior partner in the strategic operations practice at Kearney, a global management consultancy. "Those supplies will be fully restocked and my ability to go to the store to get those supplies isn't going to go away anytime soon."

Adam White, 39, of South St. Paul, Minnesota, says he and his partner stocked up on food, medication, bottled water, paper products, and cleaning supplies Saturday, the same day President Donald Trump held a news conference about the coronavirus. "We thought there would be a panic from the news of the virus spreading and wanted to ensure we could get the supplies that we needed," he said.

But anxiety levels were lower than White expected.

"The atmosphere when I was at the store was pretty normal. It didn't seem frenzied or panicked," he said. "My partner and I are in the process of remodeling our house, and have actually noticed masks being in short supply for several weeks. We were able to find some at a local 'mom and pop' hardware store for the purposes we were needing them for."

Michelle Raczynski, 44, says she and her husband were in preparedness, not panic, mode when they stocked up on bottled water, canned goods and food for their pets. "I will be getting some extra Diet Dr Pepper understanding there could be a shortage of sweetener," said Raczynski, who lives in Arlington, Texas.

Tensions were not running high where she shopped – even though face masks were sold out and hand sanitizer was scarce.

"Right now, we are not seeing the panic, which is good," Raczynski said.

“People do seem to be heeding the warnings, though, and buying some of those essential items.”



A Costco in Atlanta was sold out of toilet paper and paper towels Tuesday. Some locations have been putting limits on how many packs members can purchase.  
Eve Chen, USA TODAY

### **Price gouging: Are you feeling the pinch?**

As people prepare for the coronavirus, there are reports of price gouging especially for hand sanitizer. Have you been a victim of gouging? Tell us what part of the country you're located in, what happened and where by filling out the form below or through this link.

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