



Top disease official: Risk of coronavirus in USA is 'minuscule'; skip mask and wash hands

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Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, speaks to the USA TODAY Editorial Board on Monday, Feb. 17, 2020. -- Photo by Hannah Gaber, USA TODAY Staff
ORG XMIT: HG 138551 Anthony Fauci 02/17/2020 [Via MerlinFTP Drop] Hannah Gaber, USAT

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will be [testing for the coronavirus in people in five major cities](#) who show up at clinics with flu-like symptoms but who test negative for the seasonal varieties.

If that testing shows the virus has slipped into the country in places federal officials don't know about, "we've got a problem," Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, told USA TODAY's Editorial Board Monday.

Short of that, Fauci says skip the masks unless you are contagious, don't worry about catching anything from Chinese products and certainly don't avoid Chinese people or restaurants.

"Whenever you have the threat of a transmissible infection, there are varying degrees from understandable to outlandish extrapolations of fear," Fauci said.

Government agencies, including Fauci's own at the National Institutes of Health, are being inundated with calls and emails from nervous people, just as they were during the Ebola and SARS scares.

Fauci recalled how a nurse who was infected with Ebola took a flight to Ohio because she was asymptomatic and not at risk of infecting anyone. People everywhere suddenly thought all planes were unsafe.

"I was getting calls from people in Sacramento saying, 'Can I get on an airplane to go to Seattle?'" Fauci said. "Like, what? What does that got to do with anything?"

Other advice from Fauci and Dr. Stephen Hahn, Food and Drug Administration commissioner, includes:

- Chinese products.** Coronavirus is [predominantly spread in the air](#) from humans to humans. "Inanimate things" that are placed in a container in China and sent to the U.S. don't carry any risk of transmitting the virus, Fauci said. Neither do medications made in China.

Imported shipments of FDA-regulated products, including from China, are reviewed by the FDA and have to meet the same standards as domestic products, Hahn said in a statement late Friday.

"We want to reassure the public that at this time there is no evidence that food or food packaging have been associated with transmission and no reason to be concerned," Hahn said. "Further, there is no evidence to support transmission of COVID-19 associated with imported goods, including food and drugs for humans and pets, and there have not been any cases of COVID-19 in the U.S. associated with imported goods."

- Scam solutions.** A real concern, though, could be the fake remedies for coronavirus that have surfaced from scam artists who capitalize on people's fears. Hahn said the FDA has set up a cross-agency task force to closely monitor for fraudulent products and false product claims about coronavirus.

The agency has asked major retailers to monitor their "online marketplaces" for such products, which are subject to FDA investigation and potential enforcement action. The task force has already worked with retailers to remove more than a dozen of these types of product listings online.

•**Masks.** The only people who need masks are those who are already infected to keep from exposing others. The masks sold at drugstores aren't even good enough to truly protect anyone, Fauci said.

"If you look at the masks that you buy in a drug store, the leakage around that doesn't really do much to protect you," he said. "People start saying, 'Should I start wearing a mask?' **Now, in the United States, there is absolutely no reason whatsoever to wear a mask.**"

Fauci also doesn't want people to worry, but many are.

Nancy Lamascus-Smith of Portland, Oregon, got an Amazon package delivered from China this month.

"I jokingly asked my sister if I should be concerned," Lamascus-Smith said. "Her reply was to wash my hands and stay away from her!"

Ashley Nicole Pate, who lives near Huntsville, Alabama, also became worried when she received an Amazon package from China. Her concerns increased when she became sick a week later, so she went to the doctor to get tested for the flu. The test was negative and she was sent home with antibiotics for bronchitis.

Fauci doesn't want people to worry about coronavirus, the danger of which is "just minuscule." But he does want them to take precautions against the "influenza outbreak, which is having its second wave."

"We have more kids dying of flu this year at this time than in the last decade or more," he said. "At the same time people are worrying about going to a Chinese restaurant. The threat is (we have) a pretty bad influenza season, particularly dangerous for our children."

Fauci offered advice for people who want to protect against the "real and present danger" of seasonal flu, which also would protect against the hypothetical danger of coronavirus.

"Wash your hands as frequently as you can. Stay away from crowded places where people are coughing and sneezing. If in fact you are coughing and sneezing, cover your mouth," he says.

"You know, all the things that we say each year."

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2020/02/17/nih-disease-official-anthony-fauci-risk-of-coronavirus-in-u-s-is-minuscule-skip-mask-and-wash-hands/4787209002/>

Note: Highlighted bold type added to note key statements, later reversed.