



Infection Prevention and You

Is COVID-19 Endemic and What Does That Mean for You?

The events of 2020 made “pandemic” the buzzword in homes across the world. For more than two years, we’ve been living through a pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the infectious agent that causes COVID-19 disease. But what happens as SARS-CoV-2 becomes a more normal part of our lives, like influenza or other respiratory viruses? New terms like “endemic,” “outbreak,” and “epidemic” may soon become a part of your everyday vocabulary. **Let the following serve as a guide on how to understand these terms and their implications in order to keep you and your family safe.**

What do all of these new words actually mean and how are they different?

Endemic: Constant presence and/or usual prevalence of a disease or infectious agent in a population within a geographic area

Example: Human coronaviruses (not COVID-19) regularly caused colds in the winter months within the United States prior to 2020.

Epidemic: Sudden increase in cases of a disease

Example: Beginning in January 2020, the United States began to see a sudden increase in SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19 disease.

Outbreak: Higher than expected number of occurrences of disease in a specific location and time

Example: The first case of COVID-19 in Washington state marked the first outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States. Even a single case was considered higher than expected since SARS-CoV-2 was a new virus.

Pandemic: Event in which a disease spreads across several countries and affects a large number of people

Example: COVID-19 was first detected in China and continued to spread across the globe. By March 11, 2020, 114 countries had reported cases of COVID-19 when the World Health Organization characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic.

What do I have to do differently if a disease like COVID-19 is endemic?

There are important steps communities can promote to better control the spread of COVID-19. The ability to reduce and control the spread of COVID-19 would mean the disease becomes **endemic**. The steps community members can take are:

- **Hand hygiene**—washing hands with soap and water or using alcohol-based sanitizer
- **Respiratory hygiene**—covering coughs and throwing away used tissues
- **Getting vaccinated**—completing the series of vaccines needed for initial protection and receiving any boosters recommended by your doctor
- **Keeping your environment clean**—regularly disinfecting areas of your house or business that are frequently touched, like door knobs, light switches, countertops, etc.
- **Staying home if you are sick**—if staying home is not an option, masking and social distancing can help reduce the chance of transmitting COVID-19

Can an endemic disease get worse?

There is future risk of COVID-19 infections increasing, which could require additional measures for minimizing its impact to the greater community. A periodic increase in cases within a community is referred to as an “**outbreak**.” Circumstances that could lead to an outbreak include:

- A new variant
- Increased transmission related to a large indoor event or many smaller events (like indoor holiday celebrations)
- Low vaccine uptake in a community

When an outbreak begins to expand, and results in high levels of COVID-19 spread, the community may enter a new **epidemic**.

Why does COVID-19 guidance continue to change at this stage in the pandemic?

Guidance intended to prevent infections may change over time based on several factors, including the rate of spread or the presence of a new variant. There may be differences between communities due to the burden of disease; thus, compliance with local public health recommendations will reduce your risk of infection or spreading it to others. For these reasons, communities rely on members to take prevention measures, ask questions when guidance is needed, and provide support to those in need of accurate information or resources.

Let's continue to work together to reduce the spread of COVID-19!

Additional Resources

CDC. "Level of Disease". CDC. Retrieved 16 March 2022.
www.cdc.gov/csels/dsepd/ss1978/lesson1/section11.html

CDC. "Identifying the source of the outbreak". CDC. Retrieved 16 March 2022.
www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/about-epidemiology/identifying-source-outbreak.html



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