Social Distancing

Quarantine, self-isolation, social distancing - the worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 (also known as coronavirus) has brought a slew of new words into our everyday vocabulary and completely changed the way that many of us go about our lives. The concept of 'social distancing' has affected almost every aspect of our daily routines, but what does it really mean? And how will it help to stop the spread of a global pandemic?

What is social distancing?

Social distancing simply means avoiding social contact in person with others as much as possible. In effect, this means staying at home as much as you can - avoiding places of work, schools, places of worship and anywhere else where large groups of people normally gather together. People can still go outside for essential reasons, such as buying food or medicine, but they should do this as infrequently as possible and always try to keep a distance of at least two metres from others.

How will it help?

COVID-19 is an extremely contagious disease that spreads between people very easily. The illness is mainly transmitted through the air, when somebody who is infected coughs or sneezes. Because it is new to humans, people have not yet developed any natural immunity to COVID-19 and there is currently no cure or vaccine. As a result, the most effective way to stop the disease spreading is to avoid face-to-face contact with other people as far as possible.

Why is it important?

The most important reason for keeping your distance from other people during a pandemic is to stop medical services becoming overwhelmed. There are only a limited number of hospital beds, doctors and nurses available, so if too many people became ill at the same time, healthcare providers would be unable to care for them all. By staying away from others, we can reduce our chances of becoming infected or passing the infection on, which will slow the spread of the disease and keep the number of people who are unwell at a low enough level for medical services to be able to treat them effectively.

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 (short for **coronavirus disease 2019**, after the year of its discovery, and commonly known as coronavirus) is a virus that attacks the respiratory system, causing a cough, fever and shortness of breath. The disease was first identified in December 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan, and has since spread around the world. Coronavirus is highly infectious and passes from person to person very quickly; many people can carry the virus without showing any symptoms, so they pass it on to others without even knowing they have it. Most people with COVID-19 feel mildly unwell, but in a small minority of cases people will get severely ill and require hospital treatment. In the worst cases, coronavirus can be fatal. Those most at risk are the elderly and people with existing health conditions.

What have governments done?

Since COVID-19 was first identified, governments across the world have taken a range of measures to try to contain it. Following advice from the World Health Organisation (WHO), affected countries have asked their citizens to practise social distancing by avoiding social contact unless completely necessary. People have also been asked to self-isolate if they have been in contact with anyone showing symptoms of coronavirus - this means they should stay at home completely until it is safe for them to leave. However, in some places, the situation has been deemed serious enough for governments to take more drastic action. In China, where the disease was first identified, and in many other badly-affected countries including France, Spain and Italy, citizens have been placed under an official lockdown, meaning they can be sanctioned by the police for leaving their homes unless it is completely essential. Other countries, including Australia, Canada and Germany, have made the decision to completely close their borders, meaning nobody can enter or leave the country until the quarantine is lifted.

What's happened in the UK?

In the UK, citizens were advised by the government to stay at home as much as possible. Schools and universities were closed, as well as pubs, and people were advised to work from home if they could. However, many people chose not to follow the government's guidance and COVID-19 continued to spread. On 23 March, Prime Minister Boris Johnson made the decision to call an official lockdown, meaning that people can be fined by the police for leaving their homes unless it is necessary and no groups of people are allowed to meet in public places.
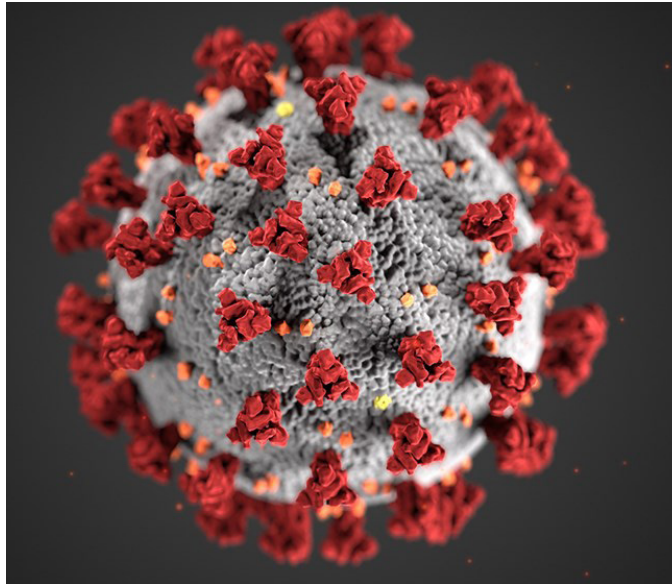
How to stay happy and healthy

It's important to look after your health and mental wellbeing while in isolation. The lack of social contact can cause loneliness and it can be harder to get the exercise you need with a limited amount of time outside. The following tips can keep you active and help to boost your mood.

- **Stay connected** - it's easier than ever to use technology to keep in touch with colleagues, friends and relatives to avoid loneliness. Try booking in a regular virtual coffee break, games night or quiz to keep yourself socially active.

- **Keep moving** - it's still okay to exercise outside as long as you're keeping apart from other people, so take the opportunity to go for a walk, run or cycle every day. While you're at home, you can use sites like YouTube to follow an online yoga or workout routine.

- **Stick to a routine** - make sure you're not just spending all day in your pyjamas. Plan out times for work, rest, exercise, meals and catching up with friends. Never underestimate the effect that simple things like taking a shower or changing your clothes can have on your mood.

- **Limit your screen time** - during difficult times, constantly looking at news and updates on your phone or computer can make you feel anxious and overwhelmed. Try to avoid spending all day refreshing news pages - check in once a day for the important developments and then try to focus on other things.

History

Although social distancing is a new concept to most of us, the practice of keeping away from others to stop the spread of illness has a long history.

- During the Middle Ages, a disease called leprosy was widespread in Europe. Leprosy causes sore patches on the skin and deformities of the face, hands and feet. People with leprosy were feared and shunned by society; in many places they were made to wear special clothes or carry a bell to identify themselves and allow others to keep away from them. In other places, they were not allowed to enter towns and cities and were forced to live in sealed-off settlements called leper colonies.

- Between 1348 and 1359, the Black Death (an outbreak of the bubonic plague) spread across Europe, killing between 30-60% of the population. The city of Venice required visitors to wait outside the city walls for a period of 40 days. If they did not develop symptoms of the plague during this time, they were considered safe to enter the city. The Venetian word for '40 days' (quarentena) is the origin of the word 'quarantine'.

- In 1969, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, astronauts on the Apollo 11 mission, became the first humans to set foot on the Moon. At the time, it was unknown whether the surface of the Moon was home to any bacteria or microbes that could cause new illnesses if they were accidentally brought back to Earth. As a precaution, once they arrived back home, the astronauts were placed in a three-week quarantine in a specially-designed chamber. Tests on the rock samples that the astronauts collected soon revealed that the Moon is in fact completely lifeless and there was no risk of infection.

Apollo 11 astronauts Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins and Buzz Aldrin meet US President Richard Nixon while inside their quarantine chamber.