

Fort Bend County Community Guidelines for COVID-19 March 13, 2020

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Since the coronavirus outbreak began, Fort Bend County has taken proactive steps to protect the health of our community by preparing for and responding to the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). However, preventing the spread of COVID-19 is something that government officials cannot do alone. That is why we are asking the community to help us with carrying out additional preventative measures. As of this writing there is no evidence of community spread of COVID-19 in Fort Bend County; however, the situation requires all of us to be more vigilant and proactive to help reduce our risk of exposure. We understand that these additional recommendations will impact the day-to-day lives of the people of Fort Bend County, but we are taking these steps to better protect the health of our community.

These recommended steps become effective as of midnight tonight through March 31, 2020 or until otherwise noted. We will continue to expand testing and epidemiologic investigations throughout the month and will reevaluate guidelines as needed.

Guidance for people at higher risk for severe COVID-19 illness

People at higher risk of severe illness should stay home and away from large groups of people as much as possible, including public places with lots of people and large gatherings where there will be close contact with others. Gatherings of seniors or other people at higher risk of severe illness should be canceled or postponed. Those at higher risk include:

- People 60 and older.
- People with underlying health conditions (e.g. heart disease, lung disease, diabetes, mellitus, cancer, hypertension, etc.).
- People who have weakened immune systems.
- Pregnant women.

Caregivers of children with underlying health conditions should consult with healthcare providers about whether their children should stay home.

Anyone who has questions about whether their condition puts them at increased risk for COVID-19 should consult with their healthcare provider. Those without a healthcare provider should contact the Memorial Hermann Nurse Health line at: 713-338-7979.

Guidance for workplaces and businesses

Employers should take steps to make it more feasible for their employees to work in ways that minimize close contact with large numbers of people.

Employers should:

- Maximize telecommuting options for as many employees as possible.
- Urge employees to stay home when they are sick and maximize flexibility in sick leave benefits.
- Consider staggering start and end times to reduce large numbers of people coming together at the same time.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched areas (doorknobs, tabletops, countertops, phones, keyboards, etc.).
- Prioritize protective actions for employees who are at higher risk of severe illness.

Event and community gathering considerations

We strongly discourage any gatherings over 250 people from taking place and for organizers to cancel or postpone any such gatherings. Additionally, we strongly encourage organizers of gatherings under 250 people to consider whether they also can be postponed or if additional precautions can be taken to prevent unnecessary risk.

If you cannot avoid bringing a large group of people together, we recommend the following guidelines:

- Anyone who is sick should not attend.
- Those who are at higher risk for COVID-19 should not attend.
- Increase the frequency of sanitizing common touchpoints.
- Try to find ways to give people more physical space so that they are not in close contact as much as possible.
- Ensure an adequate supply of hand soap, disinfectants, tissues, and paper towels.
- Encourage attendees to follow increased hygiene, such as:
 - Washing their hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
 - If soap and water are not available, attendees should use alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.
 - Avoid close contact with other people
 - Avoid touching their eyes, nose, and mouth
 - Covering their cough or sneeze with a tissue - if available - or into their elbow

Guidance for senior living and assisted living

Senior living facilities, assisted living facilities, and other facilities with populations at higher risk for COVID-19 should limit interactions with the general public as much as possible. Practical steps that these facilities can take include:

- Implement social distancing measures:
 - Reduce large gatherings (e.g., group social events)
 - Alter schedules to reduce mixing
 - Limit programs with external staff
 - Consider having residents stay in facility and limit exposure to the general community
 - Limit visitors
- Implement temperature and respiratory symptom screening of attendees, staff, and visitors.
- Implement short-term closures as needed (e.g., if cases are identified among staff, residents or clients who live elsewhere) for cleaning and contact tracing.
- Clean frequently touched surfaces daily.

Guidance for schools

Fort Bend County Health & Human Services (FBC HHS) is currently not recommending closing schools. If a case of COVID-19 is diagnosed at a school, FBC HHS will work with the relevant school and district to determine actions to take, including potential closure of the school.

We are not recommending school closures at this time because children have not been shown to be at high risk for serious cases of COVID-19. When some schools briefly closed during the H1N1 influenza pandemic, children still gathered in group settings and thus still had exposure to one another. Additionally, closing schools would put a strain on our workforce, including healthcare workers who are essential to the COVID-19 response. As much as possible, children should be allowed to carry on with their education and normal activities. FBC HHS respects individual school districts' decisions about closures or postponement of activities.

It is important for schools to limit potential spread of COVID-19 because infected students may still come into contact with those who are at higher risk for COVID-19 outside the school setting. We are asking schools to take precautions to avoid the spread of COVID-19. Practical steps that schools can take include:

- Implement social distancing measures:
 - Reduce the frequency of large gatherings (e.g., assemblies), and limit the number of attendees per gathering.
 - Alter schedules to reduce mixing (e.g., stagger recess, entry/dismissal times)
 - Limit inter-school interactions
 - Consider distance learning and/or e-learning in some settings
- Consider regular health checks (e.g., temperature and respiratory symptom screening) of students, staff, and visitors (if feasible).

- Short-term dismissals for school and extracurricular activities as needed (e.g., if cases are identified among staff/students) for cleaning and contact tracing.
- Students at increased risk of severe illness should consider implementing individual plans for distance learning and/or e-learning.
- Prioritize protective actions for students, staff, and visitors who are at higher risk of severe illness.

Some children have underlying health conditions, such as weakened immune systems, that put them at higher risk for COVID-19. Caregivers of children with underlying health conditions should consult with healthcare providers about whether their children should stay home. Those without a healthcare provider should contact Memorial Hermann Nurse Health line at: 713-338-7979.

Guidance for faith-based organizations

Faith-based organizations and communities should take steps to make it more feasible for their members to work in ways that minimize close contact with large numbers of people. Practical steps that faith-based organizations can take include:

- Implement social distancing measures: Reduce activities (e.g., group congregation, religious services), especially for organizations with individuals at increased risk of severe illness.
- Consider offering video/audio of events.
- Determine ways to continue providing support services to individuals at increased risk of severe disease (services, meals, checking in) while limiting group settings and exposures.
- Discontinue large gatherings (e.g., events with more than 250 people) where possible.
- For organizations that serve high-risk populations (e.g. elderly), consider canceling gatherings of more than 10 people.

FBC HHS recognizes that during difficult times people often turn to faith services for additional emotional support. Recognizing this need, FBC HHS encourages faith-based organizations to assist in ensuring credible, reliable information is provided to help protect the community at large.

For people who are sick

- Stay home when you are sick.
- Do not go out in public when you are sick.
- If you are ill in any way, call your doctor's office first before going in.
- Do not go to the emergency room unless you are experiencing a medical emergency. Emergency rooms need to be able to serve those with the most critical needs.
- If you have symptoms like cough, fever, or other respiratory problems, stay home and self-isolate until you have contacted a healthcare professional.

For the general public

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Use hand sanitizer when you cannot wash your hands.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue and throw the tissue away. If you don't have a tissue, use the elbow of your sleeve. Don't use your hands to cover coughs and sneezes.
- Even if you are not ill, avoid visiting hospitals, long-term care facilities or nursing homes to the extent possible. If you do need to visit one of these facilities, limit your time there and keep six feet away from patients.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick, especially if you are at higher risk for coronavirus.
- Get plenty of rest, drink plenty of fluids, eat healthy foods, and manage your stress to keep your immunity strong.
- Clean household surfaces with standard cleaners.
- Stay informed. Information is changing frequently. Visit Fort Bend County Health & Human Service's COVID-19 website at <https://www.fbchealth.org/ncov/> for frequently for updates.

Mental health resources

The outbreak of COVID-19 may be stressful for people throughout the community. Fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults and children. Accordingly, we suggest the following recommendations:

- People with preexisting mental health conditions should continue with their treatment plans, stay connected with their healthcare provider, and monitor for any new symptoms.
- Call your healthcare provider if stress reactions interfere with your daily activities.
- Call the Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5990 if you are experiencing emotional distress related to COVID-19.