

TRAVEL IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

One of the great things about living in Montana is the physical separation the wide-open spaces create. That may have protective value, though the degree of that remains to be seen in the COVID-19 pandemic. As of this writing, most of the COVID-19 cases in Gallatin Valley have come from the outside: travelers. Local spread from them is inevitable, and at some time, direct person-to-person spread will probably take over.

If you plan to travel to an area where COVID-19 is active, think twice, and then think twice again. Is this travel life-saving? Is it so important to your business that you will go out of business if you don't make the trip? Is it worth your life? If the answer is "yes", then take precautions to avoid illness while you travel. Before leaving, review the CDC website information for travelers and follow its advice: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/travel-in-the-us.html>.

The problem is: even if you don't travel to a high-risk destination, you are in airplanes, airports, taxis, Ubers, or at gas stations (if you drive), one of your fellow travelers could have COVID-19. You may have been to a place without COVID, but the person next to you could have come from New York, New Orleans, the list goes on. They may think they have "just a cold", or "a little case of the flu", or no symptoms at all. No matter how careful you think you are, you can become exposed and return home without symptoms, thinking everything is OK. Then, 2-12 days later, you come down with it. The problem is: if you go to the store, visit with friends, have a friend over for supper, you may spread it to them. That is how most the first Gallatin County cases appear to have occurred.

If you plan to take a trip, there are a few things you should do before you leave:

1. Make sure you have a working thermometer at home. You may need that when you get back.
2. Make sure you have all the supplies and food you will need if you have to stay home for 14 days after your return.
3. Think about how you plan to get back and forth to the airport if traveling by air. If you return with COVID-19, you'll probably give it to the driver and any other passengers in a car.
4. If you are having a friend bring your vehicle back and forth to and from the airport, leave hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes for them to use to decontaminate the surfaces they handle while driving and their hands when they get in and out of your vehicle.
5. Think again: is this trip absolutely necessary?

When you return from a trip to an area with widespread community COVID-19 disease, the CDC recommends:

Stay home for 14 days from the time you left an area with widespread, ongoing community spread (Level 3 Travel Health Notice countries) and practice social distancing.

Take these steps to monitor your health and practice social distancing:

1. Take your temperature with a thermometer two times a day and monitor for fever. Also watch for cough or trouble breathing.
2. Stay home and avoid contact with others. Do not go to work or school for this 14-day period. Discuss your work situation with your employer before returning to work.
3. Do not take public transportation, taxis, or ride-shares during the time you are practicing social distancing.
4. Avoid crowded places (such as shopping centers and movie theaters) and limit your activities in public.
5. Keep your distance from others (about 6 feet or 2 meters).
6. (See below for additional ideas not mentioned on the CDC site)

I just got home from a flight to a low-risk area and I feel fine. What do I do?

Plan, don't panic. The following is not from CDC but is based on their recommendations with a few additions.

1. Wash your hands with soap and water as soon as possible after you exit the airplane.
2. If possible, use hand sanitizer as soon as you get into your vehicle if you drive home.
3. As soon as you get in the door of your home, go to the laundry room and remove your outer clothes and, without shaking them, and put them in the washer.
4. Unpack your clothes and put them in the laundry.
5. Wash with standard detergents at the hottest temperature allowed for the fabrics.
6. Wipe the outside surfaces of suitcases with disinfectant.
7. Wash your hands with soap and water.
8. Take a shower.
9. Shower with standard soap/cleaners.
10. Discard your travel toothbrush.
11. Disinfect your cell phone. Disinfecting wipes are generally acceptable.
12. Limit social contacts for two weeks if possible.
13. Avoid meetings, church, social events.
14. Use alcohol-based hand cleansers before you go into any stores, and do not touch your face with your hands while you shop.
15. Avoid shopping for more than essentials.
16. Cover your mouth and nose with tissue if you have to cough or clear your throat.

See the CDC website for the latest recommendations:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/after-travel-precautions.html>.