COVID-19: Reducing Future Waves

When experts make a graph of the first wave of COVID-19 infections, it shows a flat line that curves sharply upward, like a ramp at a skateboard park. A steep curve means the virus is spreading fast. That’s because each infected person spreads the disease to more than just one other person. Then each of those people spreads it to others. And the curve keeps going up.

"Flattening the curve" means taking steps to prevent the spread of the virus. The curve becomes less steep and less high because fewer people are infected at the same time. Flattening the curve can lead to smaller spikes in future waves of infection and less impact on our communities, our hospitals, and our lives.

Prevention measures like social distancing helped to reduce the number of infections in the first wave of COVID-19. As the virus spreads, a graph of the disease will probably look like a series of waves.

The line will dip when infection rates go down. This might happen because of increased social distancing or careful hand-washing.

The line will rise when new outbreaks of infection occur. For example, this might happen if people aren’t careful about wearing a face cover in public or if they start spending more time around people they don’t live with.

Steps to limit the spread of the virus can help "flatten the curve" of these waves of infection. There are two main reasons. The first is that COVID-19 can cause serious illness and death. The second is that if a lot of people get sick at the same time, health care providers may not be able to take care of everyone.

It’s true that many people who get infected won’t get too sick. Most people recover at home without problems. But some people—especially those who are older or have other health problems—get very ill and need intensive care in a hospital. If too many people get very sick at one time, the medical community may not have the resources to care for people in the way they need.

Slowing the spread of the virus can reduce future waves of infection. This means fewer people with serious illness, fewer deaths, and less strain on our health care system.

Steps you can take to flatten the curve

Here are some important things you can do to avoid getting the virus or, if you do get it, to avoid giving it to others.

Practice social distancing.
If possible, stay home from work, and keep kids at home. When in public, keep a space of 6 feet between yourself and others. Wear a cloth face cover. Avoid crowds and busy places. Follow stay-at-home orders or other directions for your area.

Practice good hygiene.
Wash your hands often. Scrub with soap and water for 20 seconds. It’s especially important after you have been in a public place and after you cough, sneeze, or blow your nose. If you can’t wash your hands, use a hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.

If you’re sick, stay away from others.
Sleep in a separate room, and don’t share household items such as towels, dishes, and glasses. Wear a cloth face cover when you’re around others. If you need care, call your doctor. Don’t go to the doctor’s office or the hospital unless you’re told to go.