

Health officials say not to touch your face—but that's harder than it sounds

March 10 2020, by Joel Shannon



Credit: George Hodan/public domain

You might be buying—or making—lots of hand sanitizer to help protect

yourself from the COVID-19 coronavirus, but health care professionals are asking you to do something a lot harder: Stop touching your face.

In addition to properly washing your hands, experts say keeping your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth will help protect you from the [coronavirus](#)—or the flu and other infections.

Easier said than done.

"Even [health experts](#) have trouble not touching their [faces](#)!" the Santa Clara County, California Public Health Department posted to Facebook on Thursday.

That followed an article by the Washington Post pointing out that Sara Cody, the county's public health director, had licked her finger moments after urging the public not to touch their face.

"It's just subconscious behavior," infection prevention expert Connie Steed told U.S. TODAY on Friday.

She said trying to break the [habit](#) has taken a big effort for her and her family.

But it's a habit worth breaking.

Why should I stop touching my face?

Your face contains multiple pathways for infections to easily enter your body, and your hands can be contaminated without you knowing it.

"You can clean your hands all day, but as soon as you start touching things again ... the germs on your hands increase," said Steed, the president of the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and

Epidemiology.

If we could only see the germs on our hands, we'd find it a lot easier to keep them away from our face, Steed said.

Reducing how often you touch your face is just part of "common-sense basics" for avoiding all types of illnesses, not just the coronavirus currently causing widespread anxiety.

Why is it so hard to stop touching my face?

Because it's a common habit—most people do it all the time without realizing it. APIC estimates the [average person](#) touches their face 23 times per hour, based on a small 2015 study.

It's something we start doing as [young kids](#) and most of us never stop, Steed said. Becoming self-aware of the problem is a good place to start.

That's what Verge journalist Elizabeth Lopatto tried to do this week as she attempted to count how often she touched her face in a day.

After a few hours she concluded "I am aborting the mission because I touch my face too often."

What are some tips for breaking the habit?

How-to guides are popping up everywhere.

One common thread: Try your best to do it less, but don't let it ruin your day. As one expert pointed out to the New York Times, stress is bad for your [immune system](#) and obsessing over breaking a common habit could create its own problems.

According Steed, there are a few simple things that may help:

- Keep your hands busy. One way she fights the urge to touch her face is by using a stress ball to keep her hands occupied. Others have had success fiddling with a rubber band wrapped around their wrist. Or if you're really struggling, you might try tucking your hands under your legs while sitting—then you know for sure they won't drift up to your face.
- Have a buddy. Ask someone to help you by pointing out when you're touching your face—you can use a code word to help.
- Pay attention to triggers. One common one: Nail biting. If that's an issue for you, there are other tips for stopping that habit.

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