

# 5 things to do while you wait for the COVID-19 vaccine

January 4 2021, by Polly Tita

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Even as vaccinations against COVID-19 begin, the virus continues to kill thousands of Americans every day, making it more important than ever to stay safe and be ready in case it strikes you or your family.

"We can't let our guard down while we wait our turn for the vaccine,"

says rehabilitation psychologist Abigail Hardin, Ph.D. This is especially important given that the vaccines don't take full effect (around 95% immunity) until days or weeks after the second dose. Continuing to take protective measures like social distancing and masking will help protect you, your loved ones and the community while you wait for your first dose and for the vaccine to take full effect.

Hardin counsels critically ill COVID-19 patients at Rush University Medical Center when they move from [intensive care](#) to the rehabilitation unit and as they to recover at home. Seeing firsthand the toll the disease takes on families inspired her to write [A Guide to COVID-19](#) to help people manage and overcome the illness through knowledge and preparation.

She recommends taking a few key steps now to reduce some of the challenges and anxieties that come with a serious illness.

## **1. Pretend you know you're going to get sick**

Ideally, you won't actually get sick, but you will have far less to worry about if your house is in order and you have a plan for what you'll do if you or a family member tests positive for COVID-19. A good way to start is by answering these questions:

- Where will you quarantine?
- If you are a caregiver, who will take care of your children or elderly relatives?
- Where is your [insurance card](#)?
- What in-network hospital would you choose
- Who needs to know you're ill—and whom might you have exposed to the virus

## 2. Pack a COVID-19 kit

Having a COVID-19 kit for yourself and your [family members](#) will put your mind at ease. This can be especially helpful for an elderly parent or grown child who's away at college, just as you might want them to have an emergency kit in their car or a supply of food and necessities on hand before a blizzard.

"Our brains don't work as well when we're under stress," Hardin says. "It's much easier to handle a tough situation when you have what you need ready."

If you don't end up using your kit, at least you'll have copies of your insurance card, driver's license and prescriptions; a pen and notebook; an extra set of comfy clothes; and a phone charger ready should you need them.

## 3. Assess and address your health

You want to be at your strongest in case you become ill and be at your best to help care for family members if they need you.

- While anyone can suffer a serious case of COVID-19, certain underlying conditions, such as obesity, [high blood pressure](#) and diabetes, are associated with severe illness or long-term effects. If you get your [blood pressure](#) or blood sugar levels under control now, you reduce your risks of complications later.
- Adding a few simple habits to your [daily routine](#), such as getting more sunshine and creating a [sleep schedule](#) to make sure you're getting optimal rest, can improve your health and boost your immunity.
- Finally, if you smoke, quit, and if you drink alcohol, do so in

moderation (one drink a day for women and two for men.)

## **4. Tackle the tough questions now**

"Thinking about death can be overwhelming," Hardin says. "But preparing a will and talking through what care you would want if you were very ill now can save your loved one from the pain of trying to decide for you without knowing what you would want."

Every adult needs a will and an advance directive. There are several types of advance directives: a living will, medical power of attorney/durable power of attorney for health care, do not resuscitate (DNR) order and practitioner order for life-sustaining treatment (POLST). Choose someone you trust to have "power of attorney" and make health care decisions on your behalf in case you cannot communicate for yourself.

Once you've tackled the tough decisions, the paperwork is simple. Your family lawyer can create these documents for you, but there are other ways that cost little or no money. The state of Illinois provides forms online, as do groups such as AARP. You can also download advance directive forms via the Rush Center for Excellence in Aging website or the Rush Copley Medical Center Advance Directives page.

Spiritual care teams at some hospitals offer support for talking through these topics.

## **5. Stay strong mentally and emotionally**

The pandemic has disrupted our lives for close to a year, separating us from family and friends, canceling events and celebrations, closing businesses, putting millions out of work and costing 300,000+ lives in

the U.S. alone. Add in the social stressors, from racism to political strife, and 2020 has been an extraordinarily challenging year.

While you can't self-care your way out of major life stressors, there are things you can do to reduce the impact of external events on your emotions.

Schedule times to regularly connect with family and friends remotely. Call a friend when you're lonely, or find a therapist if you need to talk. Importantly, if you or a family member is struggling to cope, feeling helpless or hopeless, reach out for professional help. Your mental and emotional health will help you through whatever comes next.

"I've been with patients as they've fought and survived COVID-19," Hardin says. "Knowing what to expect and being prepared can only help you to survive and thrive."

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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