

Despite virus rout on markets, hygiene firms clean up

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Manufacturers of hand sanitizing lotion are facing strong demand from companies, individuals and agencies such as the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

This week's virus-related markets slump has hammered companies worldwide but some winners have emerged as an anxious public clamours for face masks, hand sanitizers and cleaning products.

Thermal imaging cameras are also proving hot as authorities step up monitoring for high temperatures in airports and other public spaces in their quest to limit the spread of the new coronavirus.

Demand for masks globally is 100 times higher than normal, "driven by panic buying, stockpiling and speculation", World Health Organization spokeswoman Fadela Chaib told AFP.

Social media is rife with accounts of shops worldwide running out of masks, wipes and sprays. But the prevailing medical advice is to keep things simple.

"CDC does not currently recommend the use of facemasks to help prevent novel #coronavirus," the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tweeted this week.

"Take everyday preventive actions, like staying home when you are sick and washing hands with soap and water, to help slow the spread of respiratory illness."

Use of [face masks](#) has long been commonplace in Asia at the first sign of illness and has become ubiquitous amid the outbreak of COVID-19, which began in China two months ago.

Demand is now surging in the West too as the virus spreads to more countries, infecting more than 83,000 people worldwide.



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In France, the government has released 15 million masks from state stocks to re-provision pharmacies and hospitals, for use by both medics and "at risk" individuals.

The situation is complicated by restrictions imposed on exports from China, the leading producer of face masks, as the government keeps more back for domestic usage.

"We have a factory with 150 staff in China. Our protective equipment products can no longer be exported, with priority now given to the

Chinese market," David Guiho, marketing director for French company Delta Plus, told AFP.

FBI covers up

It was a bloody week for [stock markets](#) as indices endured their worst performance since the 2008 financial crisis, on fears that the virus could paralyse the global economy this year.

But among individual outliers was Clorox Co., whose New York share price reached record highs above \$168.

"Clorox is clearly positioned for a short-term gain as everyone needs additional disinfectant," William Susman, managing director at Threadstone Advisors, told Bloomberg News. "There could be a few winners."

Clorox and other disinfectants such as Lysol and Dettol are advertised as killing nearly all bacteria and viruses.



There is increased demand for thermal cameras even though experts note they cannot detect people who have the coronavirus but have not yet developed a fever

Reckitt Benckiser Group, the British maker of Lysol and Dettol, says demand for its products has surged in China and beyond.

"Our people are working round the clock with consumers in mind," Reckitt Benckiser chief executive Laxman Narasimhan said in an earnings call with analysts on Thursday.

However, the supply of hot-ticket items is not necessarily keeping up with demand. In London, a tour of several pharmacies found stocks of hand disinfectant all gone.

Online pharmacy Medino said demand for hand sanitizer had ballooned by more than 1,000 percent in February compared to previous months, with many customers stockpiling after the new virus appeared in Britain for the first time.

Some volume buyers are taking no chances.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has ordered \$40,000 worth of hand sanitizer and face masks in case the [coronavirus](#) turns into a pandemic in the United States, according to CNBC, even as President Donald Trump downplayed the outbreak.

The demand for thermal cameras comes despite the fact that, according to experts, they are no use in detecting people who have the virus but have yet to develop a fever.

One leading manufacturer, Irish company Satir Europe, said it normally received a handful of customer queries daily for its fever-screening cameras but its backlog of orders now stands in the hundreds.

"Some of them (clients) want 1,000 units, 2,000 units, especially from China," it said, citing demand from airports as well as other transport operators and private companies.

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