

Op Ed

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COVID-19 HAS A HIGH IMPACT ON LATINOS

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that there are many risk factors for getting infected, such as old age, having diabetes, obesity and high blood pressure, living in poor communities, and being in groups with people who don't reside in households.

“Latinos, especially, need public health education, testing, and treatment during this pandemic,” states Dr. Elena Rios, President & CEO, National Hispanic Medical Association, “because they have higher rates of infection of COVID-19 than other communities in the U.S.”

Many Latinos are essential workers who are also at high risk of infection. Some work in supermarkets, hospitals and nursing homes, or live in overcrowded housing. Health disparities are growing due to a lack of preventive care, health education, general healthcare, and mental health services, as well as a lack of Latino physicians and nurses.

Hispanics are 2.8 times more likely to be infected with the coronavirus and 4.6 times more likely to be hospitalized with it than non-Hispanics, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Rios reports that “NHMA has partnered this year with AARP on a health communications campaign to inform Latinos why staying healthy is important and how to protect themselves and their families from COVID-19.”

“Angela” felt relieved to have a telemedicine consultation. For once, she did not have to rush to a medical appointment and wait almost an hour just to be seen for a few minutes. All she needed was something for her chronic joint pain — pain resulting from years of housekeeping. A few years after coming to the U.S. from Guatemala, Angela established her own housekeeping business. For over ten years, she and her crew serviced at least five houses a day. In addition to her joint pain, Angela now feels the pain of lost business. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, demand for her service has dwindled, and she now services maybe two homes a week. Even though business is down, her financial responsibilities remain. Angela is her family's breadwinner, the caregiver for her elderly mother, and the provider for her niece and nephew who live with her. As much as she wants to stay at home, her livelihood depends on her work, so she accepts all bookings so she can take care of her family. Every time Angela picks up her crew of workers to go to a job, she hopes she does not contract the virus and bring it home to her loved ones.

Unfortunately, Angela's story is all too common to millions of Latinos in the U.S. Latinos are increasingly being more affected by COVID-19 compared to other ethnic groups.

For many Latinos, particularly immigrant Latinos, sheltering in place is not an option given their employment. In fact, researchers have found that occupational exposure is a significant contributor to COVID-19 infection and death among Latinos (Rodriguez-Diaz, et al., 2020).

Like Angela, many Latinos also live in multigenerational households. This magnifies their risk of exposure and infection. If we assume every individual is a potential source of infection, Angela puts herself at great risk of infection every time she goes to work. She then poses a risk to her elderly mother, niece, and nephew. Imagine this scenario for every Latino working in a meatpacking plant, in hospitality, or in construction.

How can people like Angela minimize their exposure as much as possible and protect their families?

1. **Wash your hands with soap and water frequently for at least 20 seconds.** Wash your hands as soon as you get home before touching anyone or anything.
2. **Physical distancing.** Infected people can transmit the virus when they breathe, talk, cough, or sneeze (Jayaweera et al., 2020). Stay at least six feet away from people whenever you are outside your home.
3. **Wear a mask** (not a neck gaiter or bandanna) **that covers your mouth and nose.** Wear your mask whenever you are outside your home. If you have to carpool for work, make sure everyone in the car is wearing a mask and keep the windows down, if possible.
4. **Clean and disinfect high-touch surfaces in your home.** Using a multipurpose cleaner, wipe down your doorknobs, refrigerator, microwave, toilet, and faucets.
5. **Take care of your physical and mental health.** If you do not have health insurance, community health centers are places you can go for care when you need it. These health centers provide quality care for all patients regardless of their insurance status.
Having to physically stay away from friends and some family members can make people feel sad and lonely. Feeling sad and lonely can also affect your health over time. AARP FRIENDLY VOICE (<https://aarpcommunityconnections.org/friendly-voices/>) provides trained volunteers that you can talk to if you feel lonely or if you just want to speak to a friendly person. You can also use Connect 2 Affect (<https://connect2affect.org/>) to get ideas about remaining connected to friends and family. Staying connected with friends and family, although physically apart, is also very important for your mental and physical health.
6. **Know your COVID-19 status.** Some cities offer free testing. Knowing if you are positive for COVID-19 can help you take action to prevent passing the virus on to your loved ones. If you are unsure about whether or not you have symptoms there are resources to help you <https://www.buoyhealth.com/>.