

How to Stop Touching Your Face

We know it's hard. Try these four tricks to help limit the number of times you touch your face each day to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus.



Photo Illustration by The New York Times, Getty ImagesCredit

By Jenny Gross
New York Times
March 9, 2020

Now that we know that it's bad to touch our faces, how do we break a habit that most of us didn't know we had?

Throughout the day, we touch a lot of surfaces — doorknobs, elevator buttons, subway poles — where viruses, including the new coronavirus, can linger for days. From there, microbes can piggyback on our fingertips to our noses, mouths or eyes, all of which are entry portals for the coronavirus, as well as other viruses and germs.

It took the [coronavirus outbreak](#) to make many of us aware of just how often we reach for our faces.

“It’s a very difficult habit to break because we all do it, and oftentimes we’re not even aware we’re doing it,” said Dr. Vanessa Raabe, assistant professor in the department of medicine at NYU Langone Health.

Here are four tricks to help you stop.

1. Keep a box of tissues handy.



Credit...James Nieves/The New York Times

When you feel the urge to scratch an itch, rub your nose or adjust your glasses, grab a tissue and use that instead of your fingers.

If you feel you have to sneeze, but don’t have a tissue handy, aim your sneeze into your elbow rather than your hand, health experts say. Sneezing into your hand makes it more likely that you will pass your germs on to other people or objects around you.

2. Identify triggers.

Dr. Raabe of NYU Langone Health offered this suggestion: “Be cognizant of triggers.”

Pause throughout the day to notice compulsive behavior. Once you’re more aware of when and why you’re touching your face, addressing the root cause can be an effective solution. If you find yourself rubbing your eyes because they are dry, use moisturizing drops. If you are using your hand as a chin rest or to adjust your hair, be aware of that, Dr. Raabe said.

Dr. Justin Ko, a clinical associate professor of dermatology at Stanford Health, said he tells patients who wear contact lenses to consider wearing glasses instead to discourage them from rubbing their eyes. “Similarly,” he said, “while masks are not very effective

for preventing virus transmission, they can be quite helpful for providing a physical barrier against touching the nose or mouth.”

Putting Post-it notes around the house, or on your desktop, could also serve as helpful reminders.

3. Keep your hands busy.



Credit...Erin Schaff/The New York Times

Keeping your hands occupied with a stress ball or other object can reduce instances of touching your face and minimize triggers, doctors said. Of course, don't forget to regularly clean and sanitize that object. If you don't have a stress ball to squeeze, mail to sort or laundry to fold, you could lace your hands together in your lap or find another way to actively engage them so you are not bringing them to your face as much.

Using scented soap or lotion could also help, said Zach Sikora, a clinical psychologist at Northwestern Medicine in Chicago. When you bring your hands close to your face, that smell could make you more aware of your actions.

We know it's hard. President Trump has struggled with it, too. "I haven't touched my face in weeks! Been weeks," Mr. Trump [said Wednesday](#) at a meeting of airline chief executives. "I miss it."

4. Chill.

"My general advice would be that people should try to reduce their stress over all, as opposed to obsessively worrying about what they touch," said Stew Shankman, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University. "Stress

impacts your immune system, and the more you're stressed, the more you're reducing your body's ability to fight off infections.”

He said he worried about the effects of using ritualistic behaviors, like snapping a rubber band on your wrist each time you touch your face. It is more effective, he said, to try to be in the present moment, practicing meditation and mindfulness exercises and focusing on your breathing.

As long as [your hands are clean](#), touching your face isn't catastrophic. “It's a natural behavior we all do,” Dr. Shankman said. “It's not the end of the world.”