

# Will We Know If Our Precautions Kept Coronavirus at Bay? Here's One Simple Test

Last week I published an [article](#) about the novel coronavirus, my ignorance, and my wonder at the fear and panic that have ensued. "There," I thought, mentally dusting off my hands. "That's it. No more coronavirus articles for me."

Then came Friday and my daily trip into my hometown of Front Royal, Virginia.

First up on the agenda was the coffee shop. Ordering my 16-ounce Peruvian, I noticed a sign beside the cash register: "Because of the coronavirus we will not be using silverware or glassware until further notice." I always take my coffee in a disposable cup – the coffee stays warmer, and the lid offers some defense against a spill on my computer – but sometimes I do order soup and use a real spoon. So I wondered: If the silverware and glassware are now verboten, does that mean they were never all that clean to begin with?

Next stop was the public library. Taped on the door were posters with long lists of precautions on how to avoid flu viruses. Along with these a notice proclaimed that the library had reached "Coronavirus Level 2," which meant all meeting rooms were closed to patrons. (This took me aback, as I was unaware we had reached Level 1.) At the checkout desk the librarians were wearing blue latex gloves to prevent infection.

Martin's, our local grocery, was my next stop. The parking lot was crowded and the store aisles filled with customers pushing carts jammed to the hilt with supplies. The canned foods

section was in shambles and the toilet paper had disappeared. (I've read of exhausted medical personnel in places like China and Italy battling the virus, but in my mind's eye I saw weary factory workers heroically putting in overtime to produce TP.) The supply of milk, usually wiped out in the face of an approaching snowstorm, was holding up, but the bread shelves were almost bare.

Next came the ABC store, where I purchased a bottle of vodka. Straight-faced, I asked the cashier, "Would you prefer I pay in cash or toilet paper?" He looked at me bewildered, then burst out laughing. "Yeah, it's pretty crazy, man," he said.

Back home, I found all sorts of online reports that were also "pretty crazy." Our governor ordered all Virginia schools closed for two weeks. The church I attend announced that all Sunday school classes and Lenten soup suppers were being bumped from the calendar. Pope Francis canceled all Masses in the Diocese of Rome, which surprised me because so few Italians attend religious services. You'd surely be safer inside a church than in a café in Rome.

Air travel suspended, the stock market like a see-saw, billions and billions of dollars being thrown into the fray, churches closing, toilet paper snatched from the shelves as if we'd all eaten too much mystery stew: that's our situation. But how can we judge the effectiveness of these measures? Are we overreacting? Are these preventatives too little or too much?

To date the United States has seen over 7,000 coronavirus cases and 115 deaths from the disease.

Meanwhile, by February 1, 2020, the common [flu](#) for 2019-2020 had infected 19 million Americans, hospitalized over 180,000 of these people, and left more than 10,000 dead. The toll of those afflicted has undoubtedly increased tremendously over the last six weeks.

Our government and various health agencies have collected data on our influenza rates for years. The Center for Disease Control, for example, offers a wealth of [statistics](#) about influenza rates, hospitalizations, and deaths. We have the month by month number of flu cases going back many years.

If the costly precautions we are taking against coronavirus are effective, then we should see the rates for regular flu plummet compared to previous years. The number of new flu cases should not just dip, but fall like a stone. The good news: Our quarantines and cautions may well save hundreds of thousands from catching the seasonal flu and prevent thousands of deaths.

On the other hand, if the precautions we've taken – the closing of public institutions, bans on travel, the cancellation of sports events – don't put a dent in the number of influenza cases normal for this season, or cause only a slight downtick, then we should suspect our efforts have been for naught.

We'll see what happens.

–

[Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons-Daniel Mayer, [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)]

Image Credit: [Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons-Daniel Mayer, CC BY-SA 3.0]