What is COVID-19?
Doctors have known about many forms of coronaviruses in humans for a long time that cause mild illness, like the common cold or upper respiratory infection. COVID-19 is a “novel” coronavirus, meaning it is a new virus not seen in humans until late in 2019. Rarely, coronaviruses than infect animals emerge to infect and spread between people as well. This seems to be what happened in Wuhan City in the Hubei Province of China. Now the virus is spreading easily and quickly between humans around the globe through close contact, respiratory droplets and even by living for a time on hard surfaces.

Isn’t it just another flu?
No. COVID-19 is not influenza. Here are some ways it is different that make it more dangerous.

• The incubation period for the flu is about two days. If you catch the flu, you will know very quickly that you should not expose others to your symptoms.

• The incubation period for COVID-19 ranges from 2 to 14 days, with some instances up to 21. That means you can catch the virus and be contagious, spreading the virus in the community, long before you feel symptoms.

• Influenza makes people sick enough to take them out of circulation and stop spreading the illness.

• As many as 80 percent of people with COVID-19 will have mild cases. Many of these will be mild enough that a person may not even know it is COVID-19. So the person goes about normal life—but may infect others who may become severely ill.

• COVID-19 is twice as contagious as the flu, and with the longer incubation period, a contagious person can transmit the virus to many more people. It’s easy to imagine how quickly it could spread in large gatherings with even just a few infected individuals present.

• Mortality rates have varied between countries and access to care, but COVID-19 is at least 10 more fatal than influenza.

Don’t most people get over it like they do a cold?
About 80 percent of people infected with COVID-19 will have what is medically considered a mild case and can recover at home. Half of this group, however, is still at risk of pneumonia. “Mild” simply means they won’t need oxygen or hospitalization. About 20 percent of people infected will need to be in the hospital, some in ICU, and some even on ventilators. A hospital stay can be ten days or longer.
Can’t we just get treated if we get sick?
First, because this is a “novel” virus that did not exist in humans four months ago, we are still learning about its behavior. We don’t have any vaccines or known treatments for COVID-19. In the US, we do not yet have widespread testing to identify people who may be carrying the virus even though they don’t yet feel ill.

Second, because of how rapidly the virus spreads from person to person, if the 20 percent of people who need hospitalization happen within a condensed period of time, our health care system will be overwhelmed. We won’t have enough ICU beds and ventilators for those who need them. Doctors and nurses will be working around the clock and still be exhausted. It is not an exaggeration to say we will not be able to take care of everyone if the number of cases keeps doubling every three days.

This is why social distancing is critical right now. Most likely, the virus will be with us for a long time, and a large percentage of the population might still be infected. But to give the best care to everyone, especially the 20 percent who require hospitalization, we need to make sure not everyone gets sick within the same few weeks. This is called “flattening the curve.” Rather than a sharp surge in demand for intensive care services that exceeds the health care system’s capacity, if we slow the outbreak through social distancing, we will also flatten the curve so that the outbreak stays within the capacity of the health care system to take care of the most vulnerable people.

Who is most at risk?
Anyone can become ill with COVID-19. People most at risk for becoming severely ill and requiring hospitalization are those over the age of 60, and people with underlying health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and lung disease. People who are younger and healthy can care for those who are older with underlying conditions by observing social distancing practices during this outbreak.

The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble.
And those who know your name put their trust in you,
for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.
Sing praises to the Lord, who dwells in Zion.
Declare his deeds among the peoples.
—Psalm 9:9–11