

A microscopic view of several coronavirus particles, which are spherical with a textured surface and a ring of yellow spikes. The background is a dark, grainy purple.

FAQ

Flagsticks, handshakes and masks: Infectious disease experts clarify coronavirus risks, say golf ranks as one of the 'safest sports'

Feedback

GolfDigest.com

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Newsletter

One thing about a pandemic in the digital age is there's no shortage of information. It's the *good information* that has been more elusive, and that extends to our understanding of the coronavirus in a golf setting. Can you get the virus from even walking past another golfer? Is there danger in reaching into the hole for your ball? Should we be playing while wearing masks?

In consulting a series of infectious disease specialists, all of whom are still learning more about the virus themselves, several consistent themes emerge. The good news? **Golf is relatively safe**, especially during a time when so much else seems rife with hazard. "Golf has got to be one of the safest sports under the current circumstances," said Dr. Charles G. Prober, a professor of pediatrics (infectious diseases) and of microbiology and immunology at Stanford University.

But since nothing is without risk these days, we put a series of common golf-specific questions to three experts, Dr. Prober of Stanford, Dr. Amesh Adalja, a Senior Scholar at Johns Hopkins University's Center for Health Security, and Dr. J. Trees Ritter, DO, Fellow of the Infectious Disease Society of America. Their responses should help you understand what should and shouldn't be off limits, and where uncertainty remains. Above all, they might provide assurance that a golf course, navigated properly, can still be a refuge.

Can I contract the virus just walking by other golfers at the course?

This you shouldn't sweat. Though the virus' main form of transmission is through person-to-person contact, all three experts emphasized just walking by other players on the course or in the parking lot was not a significant risk. "The virus doesn't teleport from one person to another. It has to have some mechanism to get there," Adalja said. Yes, an infected golfer could emit respiratory droplets by sneezing or coughing in your direction, but that's why the doctors all cited the now-standard practice of maintaining a six-foot gap as a precaution. "More is better, but these respiratory droplets really don't spread much more than spitting distance," Dr. Ritter said. "When you're outside, the risk is even lower." Of course, the most important advice in this context is to tell anyone who is sick or symptomatic to stay home.

What if I'm sharing a golf cart with someone?

No question sitting within close proximity of someone for 18 holes invites more risk than walking a sufficient distance apart, which is why many courses are temporarily **restricting the use of carts**, or at least limiting their usage to one person per cart. Although the experts say riding in a cart is not a significant risk, they do acknowledge it violates the six-foot rule. Additionally, they say golfers sharing carts sends the wrong message at a time when caution is still paramount. "While it maybe isn't a huge risk, there are other factors to consider," Ritter said. "It's better to be pretty rigid up front on what people can and cannot do just to keep them in that mindset."

The other variable when using a golf cart is touching a surface, like a steering wheel, that someone else has touched before you, a risk that courses can mitigate by sanitizing their vehicles between uses. If not, the experts advocated two other steps that you're surely familiar with by now: 1. Don't touch your face. 2. Wash your hands. And since washing your hands is not always an option in the middle of a course, an alcohol-based (at least 60 percent alcohol) hand sanitizer might be as valuable in your bag these days as an adjustable driver.



Dougal Waters

Speaking of touching stuff, my golf course says not to touch the flagstick or rake a bunker? Is that really a danger?

Danger is probably overstating it. Prober calls flagsticks “an extraordinarily ineffective way to get the disease,” because infection depends on a rare confluence of circumstances: someone sick contaminating the flagstick, the virus persisting on the flagstick despite exposure to ultraviolet light (which is believed to reduce the viability of the virus on a surface), then you touching the exact same part of the flagstick and ultimately your face. So in other words a lot has to happen, and the same can be said for rakes. But again, there’s always a chance. “Any type of touched surface has the potential for transmission,” Adalja said, which is why he said, the same rules apply: If you touch something someone else touched, better to wash your hands and not touch your face.

How about reaching into a golf hole to get my ball?

“There will be very minimal risk in those types of situations,” Adalja said. “You can dream up any kind of odd situation where the virus transmits in these special circumstances, but that wouldn’t be something I would be worried about.” Similarly, there isn’t much use worrying about your putter clanking against someone else’s putter if that’s your new form of celebration. “So much of what we talk about is that it’s all possible, but it’s pretty improbable many of these implied scenarios would result in infection,” Ritter said.

Should I be playing golf with a mask?

As in society as a whole, consensus around masks is elusive. But our experts were skeptical of masks helping, especially as a defense mechanism. “Masks are not really to protect you, but to protect other people,” Adalja said. Also, Prober said, masks risk doing more harm than good because people tend to adjust them frequently. “So they’re probably got their hands on their face more, including their eyes and their nose,” he said.

What about a handshake?

Again, if the cardinal rule is to maintain distance, then handshakes need to be avoided. And if for some reason muscle memory takes over and you revert to old habits, you can probably guess what the doctors recommend. “If you’re going to shake hands with someone,” Adalja said, “you need to wash your hands.”

Feedback

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