

Should I Try That? The EASY Guide to Deciding Whether or Not to Try Something for COVID

Not long ago, COVID did not even exist. We are learning a lot about it every day, and there is still a lot to learn. There are many different suggestions out there – supplements to try, foods to eat, medications to use, ways to cope, and ways stay safe. You are probably wondering, “OK, I am hearing all these claims and sales pitches. How do I decide what to do or not do?”

This guide offers a tool – the “EASY Guide” – to help you make those choices.

So, What is EASY?

The word “easy” might be just about the worst way to describe how things are right now for all of us, with COVID and all of its effects. With the EASY tool, though, the letters in “EASY” stand for four things you should think about as you make a health care choice:

- **Effects:** Does it work? That is probably the first question on your mind when you think about trying something new for your health. Is it effective? How do I know for sure? Sometimes it isn’t easy, because we will hear mixed opinions. Even if good science research supports something, we have to decide if something that helped a group of people in a study will be helpful for us as individuals.
- **Access:** We also have to be practical. It doesn’t matter how great something is if we don’t have access to it – if we can’t get it for some reason. Something we want to try might cost a lot, or only available somewhere far away from us. There might be a long wait list to get in to see someone for a visit or procedure.
- **Safety:** Is this safe? Another key question. Say a we know something is amazing for preventing COVID (does well in terms of “Effects”). But what if it can also cause you problems – maybe it is a drug or herbal remedy with side effects, or a procedure that has risks. Safety also matters, and we don’t always know for sure how safe something will be for us. This is most important when we are thinking about doing something that has not been tried much before, which is true for most things when it comes to COVID-19.
- **You:** You are unique. It is hard to take information from a scientific study and decide what it means to you. Everyone has different genes and body chemistry. How something works can depend on our age, your medical history, and many other factors. And people have different ways of making choices. How you decide something is true may be different from how someone else decides. There may be good research findings to guide us, which is great. But that is not always the case. People make choices because they have seen

- something work for someone else, or because they heard about it from an expert or someone else they trust. They might be convinced by ads, by gut feelings/intuition, by any number of other sources of information. Where is your information is coming from?

When you are choosing whether or not to do something for your health, take it EASY! All four factors - 1) Effects, 2) Access, 3) Safety, and 4) You – can help you make a decision.

Taking it EASY: Some Examples

Effects, Access, Safety, and You. Here are some examples of how the EASY tool could be used:

EASY: Social Distancing

Dan has heard a lot about social distancing.¹ At first, it made him roll his eyes, but now a friend in another city tested positive for COVID, and he is worried. He wants to know what will help most to keep him and his roommates safe. He has read about staying 6 feet away from other people – social distancing (or what some people are calling “socializing at a distance”). He decides to use the EASY Guide:

Effects: Some of the best information we have for how not to get COVID is pretty simple. *Avoid it as best you can!* We know that COVID can be transmitted by water droplets from the body, like the ones in a cough or a sneeze. It can also affect people if they touch something with the virus on it and then touch their faces. Many places with COVID-19 have had less viral spread if people did this.

Access: Social distancing does not cost money, and almost everyone can do it. It is of course harder in crowded places, or if you have to touch people or be close to them as part of your job (like in health care).

Safety: It can feel bad to seem like you are avoiding people, but while we as human beings probably benefit from touch, there are other ways we can connect for now.

You: This is tough to think about, because it affects others beside the person making the decision. Dan would be doing this not just to protect himself, but also those around him.

Dan decides to practice social distancing until it is no longer being recommended in his community. He learns new ways to apply technology to help him maintain contact with friends and family to make it easier.²

EASY: Breathing Exercises

Anna has never tried relaxation exercises before, but she saw some online and thinks they might help her relax. She has anxiety, and it has been worse lately with the pandemic. She is thinking about trying some simple breathing exercises.

Effects: Breathing activities have shown promise in research studies.³ We know that slowing breathing can activate our “parasympathetic nervous systems” and help us calm down.

Access: We breathe all the time, and Anna has easy access to some instructions online. Examples of resources she might try can include the Breathe2Relax app or websites like Calm or Headspace. A “[Breathing and Health](#)” handout on the [UW Integrative Health Clinician and Patient Education](#) website might be helpful.⁴ <https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/files/webfm-uploads/documents/outreach/im/handout-BreathingAndHealth-Final.pdf>

Safety: For most people, breathing exercises are quite safe. People who teach them say people should not to do them if they have breathing problems or tend to get nervous when they focus on their breathing. Anna also reads she should stop if she gets light-headed or dizzy.

You: Anna has a history of chronic bronchitis, because she has smoked for a long time. Her daughter does breathing exercises all the time, though, and keeps telling her to give it a try. Anna really doesn’t want to take medications for anxiety if she can avoid it.

Talking with her primary care provider, Anna decides to go ahead and do the exercise, but not slowing her breathing down quite so fast until she is feeling a little more comfortable.

EASY: Taking Melatonin

Kim is a big fan of taking dietary supplements, if she can, over taking medications. She has been reading a lot online about what to take to prevent and treat COVID. One supplement that came up is melatonin, which is usually used to help keep a person’s sleep cycle normal. Should she take it?

Effects: Melatonin does seem to have some calming (anti-inflammatory) effects on the immune system, according to the research.⁵ There are no studies for melatonin use with COVID, but it seems to protect the lungs in other viral infections.⁶ It has been suggested that differences in melatonin levels based on age may be one reason why COVID infections are worse the older a person is, because melatonin goes down with age.

Access: Melatonin is not covered by most insurance, but people can get it at a local pharmacy or health food store. Typical doses range from 0.3 to 6 mg, but some websites recommend a lot more, and higher doses may be used for specific issues.

Safety: A recent review noted that there is a lack of human studies related to safety of melatonin in kids and pregnant and breast-feeding women.⁷ It also noted that there are few reported harms, though, and those are mild. One question to consider is, if something like melatonin helps to protect against infections, is it going to settle down the immune system too much once an infection has occurred and the body needs to fight it off? In the case of melatonin, that doesn’t seem to happen.

You: Kim is not pregnant or breast feeding. She gets nervous taking high doses of anything, because she finds her body tends to be sensitive to medications and supplements. She really wants to feel like she is doing something for herself, along with exercise, stress management, and good sleep, to benefit her health.

Kim decides to keep her dose around 1-2 mg a day, knowing that how much to take is not clear. She is glad it has a good safety profile for most people.

EASY: Power Foods

Pat has read that different nutrients are good for keeping the body from reacting too much to viral infections. A recent patient handout suggested that it might help to take zinc and vitamin C, and to eat plants with chemicals called flavonoids that can be helpful.⁸

Effects: Studies on Vitamin C have a variety of findings. Some of them show it prevents colds or makes colds less severe, and others don't.^{9,10} Coronaviruses seem to be blocked in some ways by zinc, based on studies of mouse coronavirus¹¹ and the coronavirus that causes SARS.¹² A number of flavonoids from foods settle down the immune system that is activated by COVID (though most studies are have NOT been done in people). Foods that have them include berries, nuts, tomatoes, onions, apples, parsley, and celery, among others.⁸

Access: Pat is fortunate to have access to healthy, fresh foods. Zinc, vitamin C and other supplements are available at local shops. Due to being laid off recently, though, Pat's resources are tight.

Safety: The information here feels a bit overwhelming. Vitamin C tends to be safe, but some experts recommend vitamin D be taken with caution if people show signs of a COVID infection.⁸ Zinc at a dose of 15-30 mg daily might help, and high doses can alter copper use in the body. Getting all these nutrients in a healthy diet may or may not be possible, depending on how much of each nutrient a person is trying to get.

You: Pat has limited resources and wants to spend them on the most helpful things possible. Pat is always a little worried about hype around different supplements, having seen many cure-alls come and go over the years.

Pat decides to keep taking a multivitamin, and to eat a good variety of healthy fruits and vegetables. Pat feels safe adding in some zinc lozenges but decides not to buy vitamin C, since there is plenty of that in Pat's diet already. Pat will avoid vitamin D if any COVID symptoms start.

Your Turn: EASY Does It!

Now that you have read about EASY and seen some examples of people using it for different sorts of things, it is your turn. Think of something you have been thinking of trying to help with COVID. It might be a behavior change, or some sort of relaxation practice, or a food or supplement. Now, apply the EASY guide: 1) **E**ffects, 2) **A**ccess, 3) **S**afety, and 4) **Y**ou

- Write down what you know about all four areas.
- Where are the missing pieces? That is, what else would you like to know/need to know to make your decision?
- Where can you get that information?
- Based on all of this, are what is your decision?

For other EASY guides, see The University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program [Clinician and Patient Education](https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/) page at <https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/>.



For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health	A variety COVID resources	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/
Whole Health Institute	Whole Health resources	Coming Soon!

This guide was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original created by Adam Rindfleisch, MD, Medical Director of University of Wisconsin’s Integrative Health Program, through the support of the Whole Health Institute. Special thanks to Sara Arscott, PhD for feedback and editing.

4/20/2020

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