



IDEA anti COVID-19 # 6

What behavioural economics can teach us about prevention: another way of fighting COVID-19¹

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Summary

Findings from behavioural science:

- Every one of us can help limit the spread of the Covid-19 virus today, through our everyday behaviour. Research from behavioural science to date has shown how individuals, private organizations and state institutions can all contribute to changes in behaviour that are effective in prevention.
- Thanks to the studies that have been carried out so far, we know quite a lot about how the virus spreads most frequently and what kinds of behaviour are most effective in preventing that spread. Washing our hands with soap, avoiding touching our faces and

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stifling any coughs or sneezes into the air are all very effective. However, research has shown that simply being informed about all this is not sufficient for people to change their behaviour. People have a tendency to forget, which is enhanced by tiredness and inattention; many people also tend to procrastinate and not to do things even though they are aware of wanting to do them. Furthermore, it is difficult to change our long-established habits.

- Most existing research into behavioural prevention is, quite naturally, from developing countries, where the spread of infectious diseases has been a more topical problem than in the economically developed countries. These studies have shown that frequent, simple reminders can be very beneficial.
- Making hand-washing facilities available to the public does not mean that people will use them. Their placement within the public space and their visibility play a key role. We must think carefully about how to create an environment in which the target behaviour is easily carried out, people are constantly reminded of it, and it gradually becomes automatic.
- Our habits, which are very hard for us to shake off, often act as a barrier to regular, proper hand-washing at home. People tend to wash their hands too quickly and not thoroughly enough. Even when we know how to wash our hands properly, doing so systematically, several times a day for twenty seconds at a time is no easy task.

A few practical tips:

- Make automatic disinfectant gel dispensers widely available in public areas and locate them in suitable, very visible positions.
- Issue reminders in various forms: mobile applications, wristbands, catchy posters at entrances, in bathrooms and on the fridge.
- New automatisms to extend hand-washing time – songs, rhymes, or funny videos – can help both children and adults.