



Working on Vehicles – and COVID-19

Can that steering wheel harbor the corona virus? Maybe, but not forever.

The primary route by which people become infected is from direct contact with respiratory secretions – that is, someone coughs or sneezes and droplets from that cough land on someone else's nose, mouth or eyes. That's why the Centers for Disease Control is recommending a six-foot distance. Particles from your cough or sneeze readily travel three feet. Add another three feet for safety.

What about surface transmission? If that sneeze lands on a steering wheel and you handle the steering wheel, could you get sick? Maybe. It depends on how long ago that sneeze occurred, what the steering wheel is made from, and what you do when you handle it.

Time and Material

A study of the virus found that some was still alive up to three days on plastic and stainless steel. After three days, the amount of viable virus dropped by a factor of more than 1000. After just 24 hours on cardboard, no viable virus could be found. Other studies of similar coronaviruses, such as the one that causes SARS, found viability up to nine days on plastic at room temperature (less on other materials).

So if an infected person sneezed onto the steering wheel, some virus could still live there, particularly if it was just brought into the shop.

What you do

The virus can't infect you if it doesn't get into you. It gets in via mucus membranes of your mouth, nose, and eyes. If you only touch the steering wheel briefly, the chance of transmission is low. If you wash your hands diligently and keep your hands away from your face, the chance of transmission drops.

Simply sitting in the car that an infected person drove won't make you sick. Think of viruses as small dust particles – they don't suddenly become airborne. You need to touch the contaminated surface and then touch your mouth/nose/eyes.

What should you do with that car?

It makes sense to wipe down the steering wheel with a disinfectant, because you'll be touching that and that's where particles from an uncovered cough or sneeze would land. Coronaviruses aren't hard to kill – commercial disinfectants will work, if you follow label instructions. You can use 1/3 cup bleach per gallon of water, made up fresh daily, if it won't damage the surface, or 60% or stronger alcohol.

Wipe down the door handles you're likely to touch, if you want. That's not as likely to be sneezed on, though.