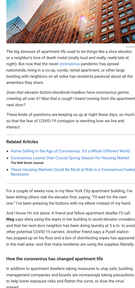
TRENDS

The Strange Fear of Life in a Big Apartment Building at the Epicenter of the Pandemic

By Janet Smith | Apr 1, 2020



The big showcase of apartment life used to be things like a late-elevator ride with strangers, or the unexpected whiff of someone else's cooking might. But now that the novel coronavirus pandemic has spread nationwide, living in a co-op, condo, rental apartment, or other large building with neighbors on all sides has residents paranoid about all the amenities they share.

Does that elevator button/doorknob/mailbox have coronavirus germs crawling all over it? Was that a cough I heard coming from the apartment next door?

These kinds of questions are keeping us up at night these days, so much so that the fear of COVID-19 contagion is rewriting how we live and interact.

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For a couple of weeks now, in my New York City apartment building, I've been letting others ride the elevator first, saying, "I'll wait for the next one." I've been pressing the buttons with my elbow instead of my hand.

And I know I'm not alone. A friend and fellow apartment dweller I'll call **Meg** says she's using the stairs in her building to avoid elevator crowders, and she's also been "sanitizing everything in sight" since the first of the year, after potential COVID-19 cartoons. Another friend says a Post-it sticker has popped up on his floor and a box of disinfecting wipes has appeared in the mail area—and that many residents are using the supplies liberally.

How the coronavirus has changed apartment life

In addition to apartment dwellers taking measures to stay safe, building management companies and boards are increasingly taking precautions to keep lower exposure risks and flatten the curve, or slow the virus' spread.

"My building has almost 600 residents," says **Travis Carroll**, a real estate agent in New York City. "All common spaces are closed, and the lobby attendants and food delivery people are allowed past the front desk, and there's now a Plexiglas wall, like bank tellers have, between the front desk team and others."

In many buildings in large, affected cities, all common spaces are now closed, including gyms, playgrounds, and pools, to limit the number of the (lifeblood of many urbanites, especially most times drifted to outside of protected delivery rooms only. Recipients must head downstairs to get their FreeBooks or Seamless orders, if that is what is possible, possibly building staff can assist. Building managers are frequently disinfecting common areas, encouraging staff to wash their hands frequently, and strongly discouraging any form of congregating.

In some locations, the need for safety protocols is especially strong, like in housing complexes with a lot of older residents who are among the most vulnerable if infected. In Florida, for instance, some emergency plans are being put in place to "prohibit nonessential visitors beyond caregivers, delivery personnel, and a limited number of immediate family members," says **Donna DiMaggio Berger**, an attorney and shareholder at Becker Law in Fort Lauderdale, FL, and a board-certified specialist in condominium and planned development law.

The closing down of amenities, like a resident's swimming pool, has not been popular, to put it lightly, she says.

"Many seniors live in these communities primarily for the recreational amenities, so the impact on their lifestyle can be significant," she continues. "SMS boards are taking their cues from our federal and local governments. They are implementing strict protocols to minimize the exposure risk."

How buildings are handling positive coronavirus cases

To stave off contagion, more and more management companies are reaching out to tenants and asking them to step forward if they test positive. According to another apartment dweller I know whose child returned home from college with a COVID-19 diagnosis, "We got an email saying please let us know if you have the virus so we can take proper measures, so we did."

When residents with COVID-19 come forward, building managers typically follow Centers for Disease Control and Department of Health guidelines by asking positive patients to self-quarantine and follow the government's cleaning protocols. As for whether they inform their neighbors of their health status, they leave that choice up to each resident.

Yet although buildings typically withhold the COVID-19 patients' names to protect their privacy, they often do send out a notice to all tenants in the building.

According to **Wendy**, who lives in a 30-plus-story building in the NYC area, "an email came saying that there were cases in the building, and that these people were self quarantining, and cleaning and disinfecting of the premises was underway."

Wendy also admitted that speculation was rampant in the building about the identity of the COVID-19 patients. Some residents were even playing detective and messaging one another with clues, and proposing meeting in the stairwell, wearing masks, to "compare notes."

Occasionally building management sees fit to divulge the floor on which the COVID-19 case is lurking. Says one Manhattan apartment dweller named **David**, "I know that Floors 3 and 12 have coronavirus cases and, as a person with an underlying condition who lives on the ninth floor, I'm a little relieved."

Live in a large building? What to do to combat coronavirus

Whether you live in a sprawling complex with tennis courts or a smaller building, this is definitely a moment when communication matters. If your management company hasn't stepped up and reached out to residents, let it know it needs to.

You can also follow the lead of some residents who post their own "one family at a time only" signs near the elevator. Or, place a box of Clorox wipes by the mailboxes, since this will help lower risks for everyone, including you. Looking for more information? The National Multifamily Housing Council has some excellent resources.

Berger advises those on volunteer boards to "continue to operate even in the midst of this global pandemic. This is no time to go dark. Engage with the proper professionals to craft the necessary COVID-19 protocols to safeguard your community."

That kind of communication is a vital way to stop the stairwell secret sharing and a big source of anxiety: the unknown.

Janet Smith is a journalist, editor, and trend tracker. Her work has appeared in Cosmopolitan, Good Housekeeping, and other publications.

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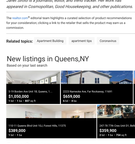

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