

# Doctor uses reach of social media to ease COVID-19 pandemic fears

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**Sara Berg, MS**

Senior News Writer

Amid news of possible community spread of COVID-19 in the U.S., there is growing concern across the country. While experts are uncertain how severe the situation will be or if the virus will spread to all continents, AMA member Peter Hotez, MD, PhD, goes beyond his vaccine development program and uses his public profile to explain the COVID-19 threat on cable news and radio. He has also taken to social media to help combat misinformation as concerns about the potential for a COVID-19 pandemic rise.

An outbreak of COVID-19 caused by the 2019 novel coronavirus—now called SARS-CoV-2—has spread throughout China and to 31 other countries and territories. At this article's deadline, COVID-19 has surpassed 80,000 reported cases globally and resulted in 3,000 deaths.

In the U.S., 60 cases have been confirmed, which includes 45 cases of repatriated persons from high-risk settings, according to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) paper published in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. The CDC also is highlighting its earlier guidance on what communities can do to prevent pandemic influenza.

The AMA encourages physicians to stay up to date on this evolving situation and has provided COVID-19 resources for doctors, other health professionals and the public. The AMA will provide continual updates.



“Having a pandemic threat touches both points of my scientific career because I’ve always had a balance between being an MD-PhD laboratory investigator—working as a scientist, and developing vaccines for neglected and emerging infections—with my public outreach and advocacy in these areas,” said Dr. Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine and professor of pediatrics and molecular and virology and microbiology at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. Read this in-depth *AMA Moving Medicine* profile of Dr. Hotez, “Restoring trust in vaccines.”

“We’ve had a coronavirus vaccine program for the last decade and now have some very promising candidate vaccines that we’re moving into the clinic in order to fight this coronavirus,” he said, adding that he communicates with journalists, and TV and radio show hosts to “share the science to the public in a way they can understand.”

While the progress has been great, Dr. Hotez believes it will be about a year and a half before the vaccine reaches the public.

In a recent AMA interview, Dr. Hotez shared how he uses social media to address concerns amid news of an impending COVID-19 pandemic.

## Don’t dumb it down

With confusing messages being delivered about COVID-19 and a potential pandemic, clear

messages are vital.

“We’ve been hearing either the sky was falling or there was no problem,” said Dr. Hotez, adding that “the reality is more nuanced than that and that requires some explanation based on scientific principles.”

Too often, news outlets “try to dumb it down too much and that creates a lot of confusion,” he said. “The American people can have a much better understanding of things if you don’t try to simplify it too much.”

## Get the point across

Dr. Hotez also uses Twitter and other social media platforms to effectively get across key messages.

“I don’t go into long chats with people or try to use Twitter to dissuade a person,” Dr. Hotez said. “Sometimes I’ll use this mechanism to point out obvious misinformation, but generally I will use it to explain my thinking about an important or emerging infection.”

While there is uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 and some reasons to be concerned, Dr. Hotez also recommends addressing the current flu outbreak because it is a severe issue in the U.S.

Learn more from this *JAMA* infographic, which compares incidence and mortality rates for COVID-19 and influenza in the U.S. and around the world. So far, no one in the U.S. has died of COVID-19, while the CDC estimates that 16,000 Americans died of the seasonal flu.

## Share helpful information

Because many people are worried about a potential COVID-19 pandemic, it is helpful to provide accurate, reassuring information to combat those concerns.

“The two populations at greatest risk for this epidemic are health care professionals and individuals over the age of 60, especially those with underlying chronic conditions such as diabetes or hypertension,” said Dr. Hotez. Read more about the eight ways to protect doctors caring for patients with COVID-19.

“We don’t have a vaccine now, so we have to use certain well-established preventive measures, among which frequent hand washing is probably the most important,” he said. “In some cases, if you

feel ill to keep yourself indoors and notify a health care professional.”

## **Align messages**

“What most Americans really want to know is if that is something you have to worry about or not?” said Dr. Hotez. “And the answer is nuanced—it’s a potential.”

“We don’t have a significant level of illness in the United States, so how you convey that is extremely important,” said Dr. Hotez.

“I’m getting a lot of questions about ‘How panicked should I be?’” said Dr. Hotez. Such questions might be preempted with a unified message, he said. For now, Dr. Hotez is doing his part as a public intellectual on social media to set the record straight.

“Right now, people have no need to panic. It’s just about being smart and prepared,” said Dr. Hotez.