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Richard V. Homan: Our actions will shape coronavirus outcomes

By RICHARD V. HOMAN
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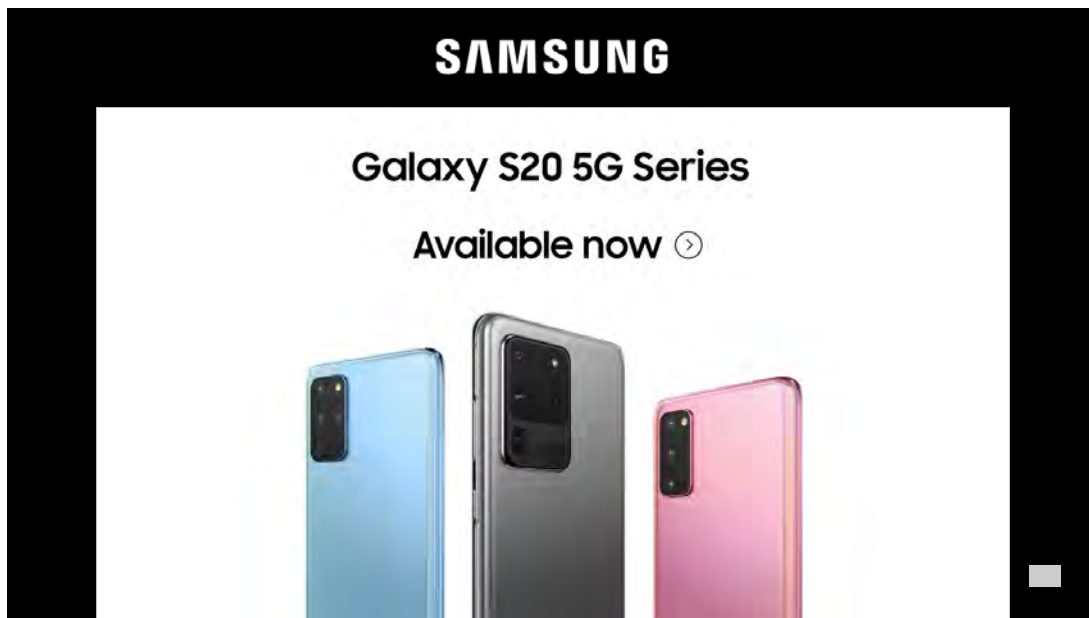


Richard Homan, EVMS(Eric Lusher / HANDOUT)

We have not yet seen the peak of COVID-19 cases here in Hampton Roads. Models now predict the first wave of the pandemic will peak around April 27. The number of infected patients may decrease through the summer, but we can anticipate further outbreaks next fall and winter. We must remain vigilant as we await development and widespread availability of effective therapeutics and vaccines.

During these challenging and uncertain times, experiencing fear and anxiety is perfectly normal. Notwithstanding, those emotions need not rule our lives. We can take actions — as individuals, as organizations and as a region — to decrease our risk and face the coronavirus threat proactively.

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Individually, we must take precautions seriously. Heed the governor's stay-at-home order. Minimizing exposure to others minimizes your risk. When you must go out for groceries, medications or necessities, maintain appropriate physical distance and wear a mask as directed by the CDC. When possible, take advantage of the growing telehealth opportunities with your medical group to ensure you are receiving proper health care while minimizing potential exposure.

Most importantly, listen to health professionals regarding the risks of COVID-19 and strategies for care — not unsubstantiated posts on social media. Now, more than ever, we must rely on sound science, medical experience and judgment.

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As a primary care physician, I keenly understand the need to care for the whole person and the whole family. Get outside safely and enjoy some fresh air. Exercise and eat balanced meals. While maintaining physical distance from others, close the emotional gap. Call family and friends or engage them online. Express your fears about the virus. Express your love for them. We cannot discount the importance of emotional support and connection during these difficult times. Taking these steps to care for yourself and your family will enhance your physical and mental health.

As a region, we can take further action to protect our communities. Cooperation among health systems has been unprecedented. Eastern Virginia Medical School, Sentara Norfolk General Hospital, Children's Hospital of The Kings Daughters, Hampton VA Hospital and Norfolk Public Health Department have been communicating often since the pandemic began. We continue to partner in a variety of ways to ensure we can best respond when the peak of COVID-19 cases occurs in our region.

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Disturbing reports across the country are highlighting how people of color are being disproportionately impacted and dying of COVID-19. As medical providers we must be mindful of this alarming trend and do all we can to address the health disparities in Hampton Roads. We must learn all we can from the experience of academic health centers nationally and conduct our own research to improve strategies for care and regional health outcomes.

As health care organizations, we face shortages of necessary protective equipment and will struggle as some of our health care providers and staff inevitably become infected with the coronavirus or require quarantine because of suspected exposure. Facing these challenges requires innovative thinking and unprecedented levels of sharing of knowledge, supplies and workforce. It is gratifying to see this already

happening. We need every resource and every health care professional aligned to help the maximum number of people throughout Hampton Roads.

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You can make a difference here, too. Our needs are not unique. Shortages of personal protective equipment and ventilators are common across the country. Encourage your local and state legislators to continue cross-municipality and cross-state collaborations to ensure vital supplies are allocated to where they are needed most. Encourage your federal legislators to bring our full national resources to bear on these shortages and improving our future supply chains.

Most of all, support our region's heroic healthcare providers, first responders and staff. This is, quite simply, the greatest public health crisis in our lifetimes. Healthcare providers enter their sacred professions because they want to be of service and want to heal people. Facing this pandemic, they are being pushed to — and sometimes beyond — their limits. They are experiencing tremendous strain and witnessing the terrible toll of COVID-19 firsthand.

Support them. Listen to their stories. Tell them how much you appreciate their selfless actions and willingness to put their own health and the health of their families at risk during this time of great need. Although these actions cost only your time, they are invaluable in buoying the spirits of our health care providers.

Fear and anxiety in this situation are to be expected. But we are not powerless. We can ensure that the peak of COVID-19 infections pales in comparison to the peak of our compassion and support for each other in the spirit of our common humanity.

Richard V. Homan, M.D., is president and provost of Eastern Virginia Medical School and dean of the School of Medicine.

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