COVID-19 has changed the way we live. Until an effective treatment or vaccine is found, societies will have to adjust to a “new normal” that sometimes includes disruptive measures like stay-at-home orders or limiting large public gatherings. Alert-level systems clearly communicate changing levels of risk, the best protective behaviors at each level, and that data is driving decision making. This builds public trust and improves community support of public health and social measures.

Alert-level systems also help countries avoid “open” versus “closed” thinking around social and economic activity. They allow governments to more clearly quantify that COVID-19 risks are increasing or decreasing and that different measures are necessary at different moments to control the spread of coronavirus.

The public elements of an alert-level systems are supported by a robust data-driven framework built with community stakeholders, with metrics that often go beyond health to include economic activity and public perceptions. This supports clear decision-making, improved accountability, and effective communication with people to encourage and empower them to adjust their behaviors.

What is an alert-level system?

Color- and numerically coded alert-level systems have been used effectively to communicate risk levels and associated response measures for a variety of threats, including poor air quality, terrorism, internet security, travel security, weather events, and other hazards, such as volcanoes. Though no single alert-level system is appropriate for every setting, if designed and implemented well, alert-level systems can be an effective public communication tool throughout all the phases of COVID-19 response.

Alert-level systems allow governments to manage interventions through data, more clearly communicate changing risk and required public behaviors, and avoid damaging “open vs. closed” narratives.
Why use an alert-level system?
Risk alert-level systems communicate the level of health risk and indicate what measures should be taken at each level to maximize safety. They are widely used and easily understood. In the highest alert stage, there may be lockdowns that require people to stay home and closures of schools, places of worship and nonessential businesses. As the level of alert is reduced, a stepwise lessening of these restrictions is possible.

When executed well, risk alert-level systems promote transparency, accountability and clear communication with the public.

### Transparency
Data supporting each level of the risk alert system should be publicly available.

### Accountability
Evidence-based guidance for each level allows governments, communities and individuals to assume responsibility for their actions.

### Clear communication with the public
Outlining behaviors for each level, and giving the public advance notice of a change in level, can improve protective actions.

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**COVID-19 risk alert levels**

- **Alert Level 4**
  - Very High Risk
  - Widespread outbreak that is growing with many undetected cases.
  - Take strong measures to limit all contact.

- **Alert Level 3**
  - High Risk
  - Many cases including community spread, with undetected cases likely.
  - Limit everyday activities to increase safety.

- **Alert Level 2**
  - Moderate Risk
  - Moderate number of cases with most cases from a known source.
  - Increase efforts to limit personal exposure.

- **Alert Level 1**
  - New Normal
  - Cases are rare and contact tracing can be used to control the virus.
  - Take everyday precautions.

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An example of a COVID-19 Alert-level system summary graphic for social media usage.

The importance of risk communication
Risk communication can help achieve widespread behavior change necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19, but it must be done well to be effective. If the public perceives a lack of consistency or transparency the result can be distrust and fear.

Risk level alert systems make information about risk and behaviors easier to understand, which allows people to make informed choices and protect themselves and their communities. Risk level alert systems should answer the following questions for people and communities:

1. What is my level of risk?
2. How can I act to protect myself and my loved ones?
3. Is the situation being well controlled or addressed by the government?
STAYING ALERT: Navigating COVID-19 Risk Toward a New Normal

Eight key principles for developing an effective alert-level system

An effective alert-level system incorporates several best practices.

EASY TO UNDERSTAND
Systems should reflect a clear rationale behind each risk level, indicate what people should and should not do, and outline additional safeguards for vulnerable populations.

TRANSPARENT
Transparency of information in times of crisis can improve public trust in government action and strengthen accountability.

DATA DRIVEN
Clear indicators with thresholds and triggers for action are needed for each level to guiding the decision to shift from one level to another in an objective way.

PRACTICAL
An alert-level system should be detailed enough to be relevant, as simple as possible, and should convey the necessary information clearly.

CUSTOMIZED TO THE SMALLEST GEOGRAPHICAL AREA
COVID-19 does not respect borders. Localities should respond based on local context but must coordinate with other jurisdictions in the area to avoid promoting movement of people between places with different restrictions.

COLLABORATIVE
Officials should engage a range of stakeholders, including community organizations, and establish a core working group and governance structure, encouraging public discussion and oversight.

LEGAL, WITH PROPER OVERSIGHT
Systems should be no more restrictive than necessary to achieve public health goals, and subject to independent oversight.

WIDELY DISSEMINATED AND AVAILABLE IN APPROPRIATE LANGUAGES
Changes in the risk alert level, whether up or down, must be communicated widely and reach the whole community, including vulnerable and minority groups.

Alert-level systems can be a core component of effective COVID-19 preparedness and response, and are currently in use in several places around the world. Systems that are developed with consideration for key principles and best practices are more likely to be useful. Every community needs to find a balance, and this may mean allowing economically important activities to begin even before all of the ideal disease control systems are in place—but only if measures are in place to better protect and support health care workers and the most vulnerable people among us. If implemented successfully, these systems can help officials lead and communicate effectively with people, guiding and engaging them through a cohesive response strategy. This will facilitate the resumption of social and economic activities as soon and as safely as possible, limiting both the economic and health damage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For more information on how to create and implement an alert-level system for COVID-19, see https://preventepidemics.org/covid19/resources/levels/.