Stop Touching My Face! Why the Easiest Way to Prevent Coronavirus Is So Hard

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Partway through a conversation about simple solutions to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, a certain reporter caught himself, his hand flitting across his face with absent-minded determination.

A rub to the eye and a scratch to the nose before settling into a pose akin to Rodin’s “Thinker,” with chin in palm, fingers curled against the mouth. It’s a typical taxonomy of face touches, but it would make public health experts shudder—especially now.

That’s because this reporter just moved his hand over every place a respiratory infection—including the coronavirus—finds entree into the human body, all in less than a minute. If you have covid-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, it began in your eyes, nose or mouth—your facial mucous membranes.

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Identifying the problem is just the first step. And the easiest. Next, you have to try to break the habit.

“Habit change is very, very difficult,” said Elliot Berkman, a psychology professor at the University of Oregon who studies habits and behaviors. “We’re designed to build habits. When you try to break habits, you’re working upstream against your own evolutionary history.”

It’s not enough to simply instruct people to stop, Berkman said; people must be able to “outsmart their habit” or form a different one. One way to do that quickly is to change something in your environment, he said. Wear something on your hands or face (just not a mask if you’re not sick) that can serve as a cue, an interruption to an automatic action.