



Dr Ben is Head of Health and Care with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). With this weekly fact sheet he will address some of the most common questions and rumours being asked by communities across Africa about the coronavirus, known as COVID-19. These questions and rumours are collected from communities by Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies working across Africa. This fact sheet aims to help National Societies respond to common questions and provide the facts behind the rumours and misinformation about the coronavirus.

## 1. Does COVID-19 only affect those who travel?

- EVERYONE can catch coronavirus, no matter where you come from, where you live or if you have travelled recently or not.
- It is true that the first cases of COVID-19 were people who caught the virus in other countries and travelled to African countries.
- Now there are COVID-19 cases in almost every African country, including lots of people who have never travelled and caught the virus in their own country. We are all at risk of catching it – even if we have never travelled to other countries or if we live in rural areas.
- The coronavirus comes from the same family of viruses as the cold or flu, so just as anyone can catch a cold, they can also catch coronavirus.
- The disease spreads when someone who is infected with the virus coughs, sneezes or talks, and the droplets they release from their nose or mouth, get into the eyes, nose or mouth of a healthy person.
- A person who is sick can pass on the disease to other persons and the disease can spread quickly within communities and the whole country.
- So, no matter who you are, it is important that you follow the five simple rules on page one to keep yourself and your family safe – particularly your older relatives or those with existing illnesses.

### THE 5 SIMPLE RULES TO KEEP YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILY SAFE

1. Always wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer. Proper hand washing should take around 20 seconds and cover all parts of your hands – fingers, thumbs, between fingers, under nails, palms and the back of your hands. Sing the happy birthday song twice while you wash your hands to time 20 seconds. This will kill any viruses that are on your hands and stop them getting into your body.
2. Don't touch your eyes, nose and mouth – this increases the chance of passing the virus from your hands into your body.
3. The virus spreads from person to person so try to limit your contact with other people. Stay home and avoid bars, restaurants and public events. If you do go out, try to keep a safe distance from others. Imagine you are holding a big broom - you are a safe distance if you can't touch anyone with it. Avoid shaking hands, holding hands, kisses on the cheeks or hugs.
4. If you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your bent elbow – and wash your hands if you do cough or sneeze into your hands.
5. Stay at home if you feel unwell and have a dry cough and fever, or shortness of breath and contact your local health services or Ministry of Health hotline. This reduces the chance you might spread the virus to others.

## 2. What is the origin of COVID-19?

- Coronaviruses are viruses that circulate among animals with some of them also known to infect humans.
- Bats are considered natural hosts of these viruses yet several other species of animals are also known to carry coronaviruses.
- Coronaviruses are known to jump from animals to humans and it is believed that the disease began when workers at a seafood market in Wuhan/China got this disease from the animals they were in contact with. However, to date, there is not enough scientific evidence to identify which animal is the source of the COVID-19 virus or to explain how it was passed on to humans.
- The virus has so far spread to almost every country of the world, with over 3 million confirmed infections.
- The outbreak of the disease started in China in December 2019, and spread to other countries in Asia, Europe, Australia and the US in January. End of January the outbreak was declared a global emergency. The first country in Africa to report a case was Egypt, on 14 February 2020.
- Nature is always producing new viruses and unfortunately this coronavirus is just another example of how clever nature can be.

## 3. Do we need to physically distance within our household?

- Physical distancing (also referred to as social distancing) refers to maintaining a safe distance between people to reduce the spread of the virus. When people who are infected with the virus stay away from others, they can't pass it to anyone else.
- Practising physical distancing means
  - not to go out unless it is necessary. Necessary reasons to go out include buying food, getting medical care, or going for a walk alone or with members of the household.
  - avoiding busy places like schools, restaurants, shops, churches and mosques. In many countries these have already been closed by the Government.
  - not getting together in person with friends or family who are not already living in the same household.
  - working from home if possible.
  - not taking public transportation.
- As soon as you or a member of your household have coronavirus symptoms, like a fever and dry cough or difficulty breathing, you should immediately call your Ministry of Health hotline, a local hospital or doctor to ask for advice.
- The sick person needs to be separated from the rest of the household members and a distance of at least 2m needs to be kept. Two metres is about the arm span of an average adult (if you stand with both arms outstretched, the length from one fingertip to the other fingertip is your arm span)
- If you are found to have coronavirus, you must follow the advice given to you by the doctor so that the symptoms do not get worse.
- It is also important to make sure that you do not share utensils, drinking glasses, bottles or towels with other people unless they have been thoroughly washed with soap and water between when the other person uses them and when you use them.
- Coronavirus can survive on surfaces anywhere from a few hours to several days depending on different conditions e.g. the type of surface. Surfaces should therefore be cleaned using disinfectants to kill the viruses and to protect yourself and your family. And wash your hands frequently with soap and water so you keep your hands clean of the virus.

## 4. Can chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine cure COVID-19?

- There is no specific medicine to prevent or cure COVID-19.
- Chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine are two drugs used to treat malaria.
- Scientists are investigating whether treatments used for other diseases, such as chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, could also work against COVID-19.
- However, so far there is no scientific evidence that these drugs can cure COVID-19.
- We therefore need to be cautious and wait for the results of these tests, as medicines like chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine can have side effects.
- If you or your family have coronavirus symptoms, like a fever and dry cough or difficulty breathing, you should call your Ministry of Health hotline, a local hospital or doctor to ask for advice. It is important that you follow that advice because it is based on what doctors and hospitals have found to work against coronavirus.
- If you suspect that you have COVID-19, you need to stay at home and not mix with other people, even your own family. Make sure you are not sharing any plates and cutlery, sheets or other items with people in your household.
- Remember prevention is always better than cure, so the best thing you can do is follow the five simple rules (see page 1) to keep yourself and your family safe

## 5. Once recovered from COVID-19, can one be infected again?

- We don't yet know the answer to this question.
- However, just as people can catch a cold or the flu more than once, it's also possible that even if you have COVID-19 once, you may still be able to catch it again in the future.
- Normally when we catch a virus, our bodies will develop a defence system against catching the same virus again. But how long that defence system lasts differs from disease to disease. Sometimes we can be immune for life and sometimes it only lasts for a few weeks or months.
- Most studies have shown that people who have recovered from COVID-19 have something called 'antibodies' in their blood.
- Antibodies are proteins produced by our immune system to fight the virus.
- These antibodies typically stay in our bloodstream after an infection, ready to fight the virus in case it returns.
- The hope is that a recovered patient has developed enough COVID-19-specific antibodies to fight off a second infection.
- However, it is not certain everyone develops such antibodies. It seems that there are some people who were able to fight the infection without the need to develop antibodies.
- We also don't know yet how long these antibodies stay in our blood, they might be gone after a few weeks.
- This means that if you were sick and have recovered again, this is not a guarantee that you cannot catch the virus again.
- Please note that once recovered, you are not infectious anymore and can't pass on the virus to other people.

**IF THERE ARE QUESTIONS OR RUMOURS SPREADING IN YOUR COUNTRY CONTACT [EVA.ERLACH@IFRC.ORG](mailto:EVA.ERLACH@IFRC.ORG) AND WE CAN TRY TO ADDRESS THEM IN THIS FACT SHEET.**