COVID-19: ASK DR. BEN

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IFRC

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. How do I use my mask in a safe way?

- Many countries are recommending that people wear face masks. If your Ministry of Health advises that you wear a face mask in public or at work then you should follow this guidance.
- Evidence on the effectiveness of face masks is still unclear but **the use of a mask alone is not sufficient to provide an adequate level of protection from COVID-19**. Other measures such as physical distancing and hand hygiene need to be adopted.
- If you have to use a mask, it will only protect you if you use it properly and if you regularly wash your hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer before you put it on and after you take it off. Remember not to touch the mask with your hands whilst you are wearing it, and if you do, you should wash your hands with soap or hand sanitizer. Make sure you remove your mask from the back (or from the elastics), not the front, and throw it away immediately into a bin that can close or wash it if it is a cloth mask.
- If you are a health worker, are caring for someone with COVID-19 symptoms, or have COVID-19 symptoms yourself, you should always wear a disposable medical mask. Following this guidance:
  - Change your mask as soon as it becomes damp
  - Disposable masks cannot be used for more than a day, and they cannot be washed.
  - Dispose of used masked safely in a closed bin
- If you are not a health worker and as long as you are not coughing or experiencing shortness of breath, you can use a reusable cloth mask, if you follow this guidance:
  - After washing hands with soap and water, place a clean and dry mask carefully on the face, ensuring it covers the mouth, nose and chin. Make sure it fits securely to minimize any gap between the skin and the mask.
  - Avoid touching the mask while wearing it.
  - To remove the mask, do not touch the front part of the mask but untie it from behind, or remove from the elastics around the ears.
  - Before and after removal or whenever touching the mask, wash hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub.
  - Replace the mask with a clean dry mask as soon as it becomes damp, or at least once a day, or more often for prolonged use.
  - Use a dedicated storage bag to keep your used mask.
  - Wash and then dispose of damaged masks immediately.

- o As early as possible after the cloth mask is removed, wash the mask and the protective bag with hot water and soap and dry it completely before using it again.
  - o Do not discard or leave the mask out without washing it or closing it into a protective bag.
  - o Wash masks in hot soapy water (at least 60 degrees Celsius)
  - o Dry cloth masks in the sun or in a dryer until they are completely dry. Damp masks may increase the risk of infection.
  - o You can use your cloth mask for two months with daily washing.
  - o Do not share your mask with anyone else.
- The most effective ways to protect yourself and others against coronavirus are the following five simple rules:

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, cheek kisses 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. Where are COVID-19 patients treated?

- Around 80% of people will recover from COVID-19 at home, without the need for hospital care.
- As soon as you or a member of your household have COVID-19 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.
- They will advise you if you should stay home or leave the house to get medical care.
- If you are found to have COVID-19, you must follow the advice given to you by the doctor so that the symptoms do not get worse.
- Anyone who has or is suspected to have COVID-19 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)
- 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.

- A person suffering from more severe symptoms will be treated in a health clinic or a hospital. Depending on where you live, there might be special treatment centres set up only for COVID-19 patients. In other countries, people with COVID-19 might be treated in existing hospitals or health clinics – but they will be kept separated from other patients. This means if you need to go to hospital for something other than COVID-19, like a pregnancy, an accident or other illness, it is still safe for you to do this as you will be kept separate from any COVID-19 patients.
- As mentioned, as soon as you suspect yourself or someone else to be infected, call the Ministry of health hotline, a local hospital or doctor for advice and they will tell you how to best proceed. Do not go to a health centre or doctor without calling in advance.

3. What is the difference between COVID-19 and a normal flu?

- COVID-19 and the normal flu (also called influenza) are both a type of virus, called a corona virus.
- Corona viruses are a family of viruses that cause different respiratory illnesses from the common cold or flu to more severe diseases such as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).
- COVID-19 and the flu **are similar** because:
  - They **both spread in the same way** - 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 who is close by.
  - They can be **prevented in the same way** – by frequent handwashing with soap and water and maintaining a safe distance from other people.
  - **Older people and those with underlying illnesses** are more at risk of becoming seriously ill if they catch COVID-19 or the flu. However, children don't appear to be as at risk from COVID-19 as they are from the flu.
  - **Some of the symptoms are similar** - like fever, cough, sore throat, muscle aches and tiredness. However, COVID-19 often also includes shortness of breath and the cough is usually a dry cough. With flu, people often start to feel unwell very suddenly, whereas with COVID-19 it is more gradual with symptoms developing over a few days.
- COVID-19 and the flu **are different** because:
  - **More people who catch COVID-19 are likely to become seriously ill** and need medical care than those who get the flu. While many people who get the flu or COVID-19 will only have mild symptoms and can recover at home, WHO estimates around 20% of people who catch COVID-19 will require hospital care, which is much higher than for the flu.
  - **COVID-19 has a higher death rate than the flu**. Though the death rate for COVID-19 is still unclear, most research suggests it is much higher than that of the seasonal flu. The flu virus is often explained as having a case fatality rate of less than 0.01% – this means for every 1000 people who get the flu, one person will die. The latest figures from the Africa Centres for Disease Control suggest at the moment, COVID-19 has a case fatality rate in Africa of 3% - meaning for every 1000 people who catch COVID-19, 30 people will die. However, it is hard to say how many people on average die from COVID-19 as we don't know exactly how many people have caught the virus due to limited testing.
  - **COVID-19 spreads more easily than the flu**. Every person who catches flu, will infect on average another 1.3 people. Researchers are still working to determine

how infectious COVID-19 is, but current studies suggest someone with COVID-19 will infect another 2-3 people – meaning someone with COVID-19 will pass on the infection to more people than someone with the flu.

- So, while you catch and prevent the flu and COVID-19 in the same way, COVID-19 spreads more easily and can lead to more serious illness if you catch it. This is why we all have to work together to try and stop the spread of this virus in our communities by following the five simple rules on page one.

4. Why hasn't WHO approved medicines developed in Africa?

- No medicines have been approved yet to prevent or cure COVID-19, from Africa or from anywhere else in the world.
- Before a medicine can be approved, it needs to be properly tested to make sure it is safe for people to use and has been proven to work against COVID-19.
- More than 150 different drugs are being researched around the world to see if they might help treat COVID-19, but these tests take time and WHO cannot recommend any of these drugs until the tests are completed – otherwise they risk recommending a medicine that either doesn't really work or can harm people.
- For example, trials are taking place in Germany right now to see if the plant used in Madagascar's herbal remedy can help people recover from COVID-19.
- Tests are also being carried out on the malaria drug, hydroxychloroquine, but these have been paused while scientist investigate some safety concerns about the drug.
- This is why drugs MUST be tested properly before they can be recommended for widespread use.
- If you do fall sick with a cold, flu or even COVID-19, some herbs or traditional medicines might help ease the symptoms of coronavirus, like a sore throat or cough, but there is no proof they can prevent or cure the disease.
- Remember prevention is always better then cure, so the best thing you can do is follow the five simple rules (see page 1) to keep yourself and your family safe.

IF THERE ARE QUESTIONS OR RUMOURS SPREADING IN YOUR COUNTRY CONTACT EVA.ERLACH@IFRC.ORG AND WE CAN TRY TO ADDRESS THEM IN THIS FACT SHEET.