



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. What should I do if I suspect someone has COVID-19?

- If you or another person in your environment has 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 all other people 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 a person is found to have coronavirus, he or she must follow the advice given by the doctor so that the symptoms do not get worse.
- If the symptoms are not too strong, the person can be cared for at home.
- It is also important to make sure that the sick person does 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.
- 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.
- Follow the five simple rules below to keep yourself and your family safe:

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. If people recover from COVID-19, does it mean there is a cure?

- A cure is a medicine that will kill the virus and help the person recover more quickly. So far there is no proven cure for COVID-19.
- However, you don't need a medical cure to recover from COVID-19. Just as a person can recover from a cold or flu, they can also recover from COVID-19. This is because the body's immune system will always try to fight off viruses that enter your system.
- Most people who catch COVID-19 will be able to recover at home, with plenty of rest, water and perhaps taking some paracetamol to relieve a sore throat, headache or fever. However if you have difficulties breathing or a very high fever it is important to call your Ministry of Health hotline or local healthcare facility for advice.
- Most people with mild symptoms will recover from COVID-19 within two weeks. For those who become more seriously ill, it could take six weeks or more to fully recover.
- Once a person has fully recovered from COVID-19 the virus has left their body they are no longer infectious. A safe rule is to say a person is no longer infectious once these three conditions have been achieved;
 - Your symptoms have improved
 - You have not had a fever for three days
 - It has been at least 10 days since your symptoms first started.
- Almost half (47%) of the people in Africa who have caught COVID-19 so far have already recovered from the virus.

3. Can wearing a mask have negative side effects?

- Wearing a mask might not always feel comfortable, especially in hot weather – but there are no negative side effects to your health from wearing a face mask.
- **It is not true** that wearing a mask for long time can lead to oxygen reduction in the blood and brain and make you ill. This is because paper or fabric masks are not airtight. When you breathe in and out, the air simply passes through the material or out the sides.
- Doctors wear face masks in hospitals all day and throughout their whole lives, and they do not get sick.
- However, wearing a face mask will only protect you from catching or spreading COVID-19 if you use it properly. To use your mask properly:
 - Wash your hands with soap and water or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer **BEFORE** you put on the mask
 - Cover your mouth and nose with the mask and make sure there are no gaps or spaces between your face and the mask
 - Do not touch the mask while using it. If you do, wash your hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer
 - To remove the mask, do not touch the front but remove the mask from the back and throw it away immediately into a bin that can close. Wash your hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer
 - You must always replace the mask when it becomes damp and you must never use a mask two or more times if it is a single use mask.
 - For cloth masks, the same rules apply but you need to wash it daily with hot water and soap and let it dry in the sun until completely dry. Don't leave it lying around where it can get dirty, keep it on a clothesline or in a protective bag.
- Remember, a mask alone is not enough to protect you from COVID-19. You also have to follow the other prevention measures on page one, like regularly washing your hands and limiting your contact with other people.

4. Which precautions can be taken at schools?

- Some countries have re-opened their schools or are planning to do so.
- Following basic principles can help keep students, teachers, and staff to stay safe at school and help stop the spread of this disease.
 - Sick students, teachers and other staff should not come to school
 - Schools should enforce regular hand washing with safe water and soap, alcohol rub/hand sanitizer or chlorine solution and, at a minimum, daily disinfection and cleaning of school surfaces
 - Schools should provide water, sanitation and waste management facilities and follow environmental cleaning and decontamination procedures
 - Schools should promote physical distancing (a term applied to certain actions that are taken to slow down the spread of a highly contagious disease, including limiting large groups of people coming together)

- Implement social distancing practices that may include:
 - Staggering the beginning and end of the school day
 - Cancelling assemblies, sports games and other events that create crowded conditions
 - When possible, create space for children's desks to be at least one metre apart
 - Teach and model creating space and avoiding unnecessary touching
- A procedure needs to be established for the case that students or staff feel unwell. This should cover steps to take for separating sick students and staff from those who are well—without creating stigma – and a process for informing parents/caregivers. Students/staff may need to be referred directly to a health facility, depending on the situation, or sent home.
- It also needs to be ensured that up to date information on the disease situation, including prevention and control efforts at school is shared with all students, parents and staff.
- Children should be encouraged to discuss their questions and concerns and provide information in an honest, age-appropriate manner.
- Students should also be guided on how to support their peers and prevent exclusion and bullying.
- Ensure teachers are aware of local resources for their own well-being. Work with school health workers/social workers to identify and support students and staff who exhibit signs of distress.
- The continuity of critical services that may take place in schools such as health screenings, feeding programs or therapies for children with special needs to be ensured. Consider the specific needs of children with disabilities, and how marginalized populations may be more acutely impacted by the illness or its secondary effects.

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.