



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. Can wearing a face mask cause respiratory problems?

- While wearing a face mask for a long period of time can be uncomfortable, it cannot cause respiratory problems, CO<sub>2</sub> intoxication or oxygen deficiency.
- Wearing a face mask is one of the many protective measures that can help to stop the spread of the virus and save lives, as they reduce the spray of droplets from the mouth and nose. Make sure when you wear a mask that it fits properly and that it is tight enough while still letting you breathe normally.
- Most people will be able to wear a face mask without problems, but if you have a severe asthma or other respiratory problems *and* you are having difficulties with wearing a face mask there are other ways that you can protect yourself from the virus, including:
  - Staying at home as much as possible
  - Keep a distance from others of at least 2 meters and avoid crowded areas
  - Avoid close contact with people who are sick
  - Wash your hands often with soap and water for 20 seconds
  - Avoid unnecessary travel
  - Clean and disinfect your home regularly, especially frequently touched surfaces and objects like tables, light switches and door handles.
- Using a face mask alone is not enough to protect you against COVID-19, you also need to continue following the other health measures recommended in page two in order to keep yourself and your family safe.
- For more information on the considerations for wearing face masks like who should wear a mask, the different types of masks and other types of face protection see CDC's guide available [here](#).

## 2. When will we see the end to wearing face masks, physical distancing and other prevention measures?

- It is likely that we will have to follow prevention measures like wearing a face mask or physical distancing for a long time to stop the virus from spreading. Until an effective and safe vaccine is found, the pandemic is not likely to end.

- Some countries have already started rolling out COVID-19 vaccines but we don't know when the vaccine will be available in all countries because it needs to be approved by regulators at the national level before it can be distributed to the public.
- Even with a vaccine, countries will not return to normal quickly as we don't know how quickly the COVID-19 vaccines could control the pandemic. That will depend on many things, like:
  - The effectiveness of the vaccine
  - How long the vaccine will keep people protected against the virus
  - How many people get vaccinated
  - How long people continue to follow measures such as using face masks and physical distancing.
- For a population to have community protection, 60-80% of the population would have to be immune to the virus. Even if there were enough doses of the vaccine available today for everyone in a country, it would still take time to vaccinate everyone who wants to be vaccinated.
- The number of COVID-19 vaccines will be limited at first, which means that not everyone will be able to get vaccinated at the same time. When the vaccine becomes available, it will be given first those most at risk of severe COVID-19. The specific groups that will be target first depends on the vaccine and the country but it is likely to be frontline health and care workers, people above 65 years of age and people with underlying health conditions.
- So, for the time being, everyone – even people who have been vaccinated from COVID-19 should continue to follow the measures that help to protect us like keeping a distance from others by 2 meters, wearing a face mask, washing your hands with soap and water, coughing or sneezing into a tissue or bent elbow and staying at home when you feel unwell.
- Respecting all of these measures will provide the best possible protection against getting or spreading COVID-19. As always, remember prevention is better than the cure!

## 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 help 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 and wear a face mask. 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.

## 3. Are the COVID-19 vaccines safe?

- Like all vaccines, COVID-19 vaccines are going through many clinical trials, that involve tens of thousands of people. The purpose of these trials is to test the vaccine for any side effects to make sure that the vaccine is safe before it is distributed to the public.
- The vaccine is only available to the public when the regulating agencies are confident that the vaccine is safe and effective.
- You cannot get COVID-19 from the vaccine. Vaccines work by teaching your body's immune system to recognise the virus and fight the infection. Some people might feel mild side effects after being vaccinated, like a raised temperature or a sore arm where the vaccine was injected but severe side effects, like allergic reactions are rare. Mild side effects like these are normal in most vaccines.
- There is a lot of evidence that shows how getting a vaccine can be a powerful way to protect you and your community, but no vaccine is 100% effective. In some cases, people might still get COVID-19 even after getting vaccinated but experts believe that getting a COVID-19 vaccine can also help keep you from getting seriously ill even if you do get the virus.
- There are a lot of anti-vaccine stories spreading online and offline, make sure to fact-check any information that you hear or read. For reliable information on COVID-19 vaccine safety go to the WHO website: <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/vaccines-and-immunization-vaccine-safety>

## 4. Why doesn't the Red Cross/Red Crescent distribute face masks to communities?

- The Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies are supporting millions of people in 49 countries across the Africa region every day so logistically and financially, it would be very difficult to give every family protective equipment like face masks.
- Medical face masks are very expensive, that's why the WHO recommends that if you are not a healthcare worker, a person above 60 years of age or with a pre-existing medical condition, use a fabric face mask instead. Fabric masks can be made with local materials and still offer some protection against the virus.
- For more information on fabric face masks including the correct use and production, see this [factsheet](#). Remember, masks alone don't guarantee protection. For the best protection, we need to follow the other health measures like washing our hands frequently with soap and keeping a safe distance of 2 meters from others.
- The Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies may not be able to distribute protective equipment to everyone but there are other ways that the National Societies are helping to prevent the spread of the outbreak. For example, National Societies are working with communities to help community members plan ways to prevent and manage outbreaks of COVID-19 in their area, by building handwashing stands with local materials, sewing masks for vulnerable households or agreeing on the best way to care for people who get the virus.

## COVID-19: ASK DR BEN

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- Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies are also making sure that communities have the information they need about COVID-19 to stay safe, including how it spreads, how to prevent it, the symptoms and what to do if you think you might have the infection.

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