COVID-19: ASK DR BEN

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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 a mother pass COVID-19 to her unborn child?

- As this is a new virus, very little is known about transmission from mother to unborn child and the impact of COVID-19 on newborns.
- We do know newborn babies can be infected with COVID-19 after being in close contact with an infected person. In fact, some babies have tested positive for COVID-19 shortly after birth, but it is not known whether the virus was transmitted before, during or after birth. So far, there has only been one case reported of a baby testing positive for COVID-19, while still in the womb.
- Most newborns who have tested positive for COVID-19 had mild or no symptoms and have fully recovered. However, among some mothers who tested positive for COVID-19 have had issues during pregnancy such as giving birth early so it is important pregnant women take extra care to protect themselves from COVID-19.
- If you are caring for children, you can teach them the 5 rules to prevent COVID-19, such as; wash your hands frequently and keep a distance of at least 1 meter from others, to help them stay healthy and in turn help protect yourself and your family.
- Scientists and health experts continue to monitor the situation for women and babies but it is important that you continue to take care of yourself and your baby during pregnancy and after child birth.

2. Do children have to wear face masks?

- There is a worldwide shortage of medical or surgical masks and WHO is urging people to use masks wisely and to make sure there's enough for healthcare workers. Because of this only those at-risk people are required to wear a medical mask. Such people are:
  - o Health care workers
  - o People who have coronavirus symptoms – coughing, sneezing, fever
  - o People who are caring for someone who might have coronavirus

- Based on evidence, children do not appear to be at higher risk for COVID-19 than adults. While some children have tested positive for the virus that causes COVID-19, it is adults that make up most of the known cases. Therefore, children are not required to wear a mask unless your Government indicates otherwise.
  - However, when it is difficult to practise physical distancing, children 2 years and older can wear a cloth mask to help stop the spread of the virus.
  - Though, wearing a mask does not mean that you should ignore other protective measures. The most effective way to protect your children and yourself against coronavirus is by following the 5 rules of COVID-19: frequently clean your hands, cover your cough with a tissue or your bent elbow, limit your children's contact with other people by staying at home or maintain a distance of at least 1 meter from other people.
- Teach your children to follow these steps to protect themselves. As much as you can, explain why we have to follow these measures and lead by example. Be a good role model, if your wash your hands often, they are more likely to do the same.

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.

3. How reliable are COVID-19 tests?

- There are two types of tests available for COVID-19. These are: diagnostic tests and antibody tests.
- A **diagnostic test** can show if you have COVID-19 at that moment and it is usually a very accurate test. The test is usually carried out by taking a swab of your nose or throat, but sometimes a sample of your saliva is also used. Normally it can take up to 1 week to get the results back, but this varies from country to country.

- o   If the diagnostic test is **positive for COVID-19,** you should isolate yourself from others to make sure you don't pass on the virus to others and follow the home care advice. Monitor your symptoms and call your local MoH if your symptoms worsen, particularly if you develop a high fever or difficulty breathing.
- o   If you test **negative for COVID-19**, it means you were not infected at the time you took the test. You might test negative if your sample was collected early in your infection. Testing negative does not mean you will not get sick, you could also be infected in the future and test positive.

- The second test, the **antibody test** can show whether you have had COVID-19 in the past. Antibodies are produced by the body when you get an infection, to help fight the infection. If you have antibodies in your blood it is likely you have had the virus before. The test is usually taken using a small blood sample gathered from pricking a finger for example.
- However, this test is not 100% accurate and some people may have had COVID-19, but not have any antibodies. It also will not show whether you have a current COVID-19 infection.
- There are a lot of questions about whether you can catch COVID-19 twice, but there is no clear evidence. It is likely you will be immune immediately after an infection, but we do not know how long this immunity lasts. To be safe, it is better to always be alert and follow the recommended measures on page 2.

4. Is there a vaccine yet? When will there be one?

- Currently there is no vaccine, drug or treatment shown to prevent or cure COVID-19. However, researchers from around the world are working to develop a vaccine or cure for coronavirus as quickly as possible.
- Historically, vaccines have taken 2 to 5 years to develop but with a global effort researchers could potentially develop a vaccine in a shorter amount of time.
- Developing a vaccine is very big task and requires the collaboration of several organisations. There are also many stages that people are not aware of that researchers have to go through before a vaccine is available to the public.
- At the moment there are 148 potential vaccines that researchers are testing but there are many challenges that are faced during the testing stages which could delay how quickly a vaccine is determined safe and ultimately approved.
- Developing a vaccine is very important to ending this pandemic, it is one of the most powerful tools in public health and it would mean we would have long-term protection from COVID-19. But until a vaccine become available the only way we can keep ourselves and others safe is by washing our hands frequently, not touching our eyes, nose and mouth, using a tissue or our bent elbow when we sneeze or cough and keeping a distance of at least 1 meter from others.

- If you are suffering from symptoms of COVID-19 such as coughing and fever, stay at home to stop the spread of the disease. Monitor your symptoms and if they worsen call your local MoH for medical advice, they can tell you whether you should remain at home or if you need to seek medical care.

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.