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 kind of psychosocial support is provided as part of the COVID-19 response?

- COVID-19 can impact people in different ways. For some it may be a stressful time, prevention measures like lockdowns, quarantine and physical distancing can make people feel isolated and lonely. Other people might feel fear and anxiety because this is a new disease and there is still a lot that we don't know about it.
- But it's important that we learn to cope with stress in a healthy way.
- Red Cross and Red Crescent staff and volunteers are working hard to provide mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to people and communities that have been affected by COVID-19 to help them cope with these strong and overwhelming emotions.
- To support people with their mental health or stress levels during the pandemic Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies are:
    - Preparing families to receive back family members who have recovered from COVID-19, and making sure they have the information they need about COVID-19 to stay safe, including how it spreads, how to prevent it, symptoms and what to do if you think you might be infected. This helps to minimise stigma and discrimination of survivors.
    - Providing psychological first aid for people who are in quarantine, isolation or treatment centres.
    - Contacting and comforting families that have lost their loved ones from COVID-19, and help them understand the changes in burial and other rituals because of the virus
    - Making referrals for people with pre-existing physical and mental health conditions so that they can get the appropriate treatment
    - Providing phone-counselling and advice through hotlines to people with COVID-19 who are asked to self-care at home.

2. How can we support and protect people who have recovered from COVID?

- There is a lot of confusion, anxiety and fear around COVID-19. For people who have recovered from the virus, it might be a difficult and scary time. They might feel lonely or

anxious after being in self-isolation, for other people re-integrating back into the communities might make them feel stressed or afraid.

- But when someone who was infected with COVID-19 recovers, they are no longer infectious to other people, so there is no need to feel embarrassed or ashamed.
- To support people who have recovered from COVID, there is a lot that we can do including:
  - Listening actively; let people talk in their own time and when they do, hear their concerns with care. But never pressure someone to speak if they don't want to.
  - Showing respect and empathy towards their experience. When you try to understand how someone feels, it can help in building trust and it will make them feel more relaxed and comfortable.
  - If they are of a particular faith, you can reassure them with message of hope, solidarity, and comfort. Help them understand their situation from a faith perspective.
  - You can also support them by distracting them from their situation, encourage them to do activities that they enjoy for example cooking, playing a game, going for a walk, etc.
  - Knowing the facts about COVID-19 and sharing accurate information about the virus can also make others feel less stress and it can help you to connect with them. Stopping the spread of rumours can also help reduce stigma around the disease which will help in the reintegration of the person back into their community.
- If they start to experience serious distress, get help from someone who has been trained to handle cases such as these. Don't put yourself at risk. It's important that you take care of your own physical and mental health too.

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 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. Why is Africa less affected than other continents?

- In the beginning of the pandemic many people were worried about the impact that COVID-19 would have on the African continent with early warnings from experts that the virus could overburden weak health systems and kill many people.
- But the African continent so far has been less affected than other parts of the world. Of the world's six regions, Africa has the second lowest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases.
- There might be many different reasons for this. For one, because there were fears that COVID-19 could quickly overrun weak health systems in the region, most African governments put in place drastic measures to try and slow the spread of the virus. Some countries even acted before a single case was reported by closing their borders and going into lockdown. This would have prevented the fast rise of cases we saw in other parts of the world.
- A second reason could be that most people in Africa are of a young age, in fact Africa has the youngest population in the world.
- Young people are less likely to get very ill with COVID-19 and may even show no symptoms at all. This means lots of young people may have the virus but not know it, which could be why it seems like Africa has been less affected. In Europe, there are a lot more older people over the age of 65, who are more likely to get very ill or even die with COVID-19, which could be why it seems like Europe has been more badly affected.
- Thirdly, the COVID-19 outbreak happened at a time when the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was managing the outbreak of another deadly virus, Ebola. So many countries, including DRC were on high alert and more prepared for public health crises. Many countries used the lessons learnt from Ebola to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- But it is also difficult to say for sure whether the Africa region has really been less affected than other continents because the region also has one of the lowest testing rates compared to other parts of the world, meaning that we are not testing enough. So the low numbers of testing and poor data on reporting and death registration might also be the reason for why it looks like the Africa region has been less affected.
- This is because the number of cases will be affected by the number of tests carried out - the more tests we do, the more positive cases we find, so if very few people are being tested then that could explain why there are low case rates.
- People who are asymptomatic are also less likely to be tested because they don't know they have the virus and unless the country is doing widespread community testing they would not even consider getting a COVID-19 test.

4. How can I cough or sneeze safely in public?

- Coughing or sneezing can spread the COVID-19 virus from one person to another because 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, they can become infected with the virus too. See this [video] for more on COVID-19 transmission.

- To stop the spread of the virus and protect others from catching it it's important that we learn to cough or sneeze safely. Remember it is possible to have COVID-19 and not even know it, so even if you think you don't have the virus it's good to follow these practices to make sure you don't accidentally pass the virus to others – especially those who are more vulnerable and could get very ill.
- Following these practices also helps to stop the spread of other viruses like the cold and flu so this is good behaviour for all of us to follow, all of the time.
- The best way to stop the virus from leaving your mouth, is by covering your nose and mouth with a tissue. Make sure to throw your used tissues away immediately.
- If you don't have a tissue, the best way to catch your cough or sneeze is to bend your elbow and hold it close to your face while coughing or sneezing. This works better if you are wearing long sleeves because then your clothes can contain the virus so it doesn't spread into the air.
- **Do not** cough or sneeze into your hands. This can spread the virus because if you sneeze or cough into your hands and then touch objects and surfaces like items in a shop, door knobs, bus seats, etc. with your hands, someone else can then become infected by touching those contaminated surfaces and then accidentally touching their face.
- Whenever you cough or sneeze, it's very important to wash your hands with soap and water right away in order to clean your hands of any remaining viruses. Even if you used a tissue, you should wash your hands well. If you don't have soap available, you can also use a hand sanitizer with 70% alcohol.
- If you feel a cough or sneeze coming, it's always polite to step away from other people that are close by. If you feel unwell and you are coughing or sneezing a lot, then stay at home to help prevent other people from getting sick too.

**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.**