Dr Ben is Head of Health and Care with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). With this monthly 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. After how many doses of the COVID-19 vaccine are you fully immunised?

It is of importance to note that vaccines do not serve the purpose of curing a disease. Rather, vaccines boost your immune system and enable you to fight off disease.
For some COVID-19 vaccines, two doses are required. It's important to get the first and second dose of the vaccine if the vaccine requires two doses, this is to ensure one receives full immunization. For vaccines that require two doses, the first dose presents antigens – proteins that stimulate the production of antibodies – to the immune system for the first time. Scientists call this priming the immune response. The second dose acts as a booster, ensuring the immune system develops a memory response to fight off the virus if it encounters it again.

Because of the urgent need for a COVID-19 vaccine, initial clinical trials of vaccine candidates were performed with the shortest possible duration between doses. Therefore, an interval of 21–28 days (3–4 weeks) between doses is recommended by WHO. Depending on the vaccine, the interval may be extended for up to 42 days – or even up to 12 weeks for some vaccines – based on current evidence. There are many COVID-19 vaccines being developed and produced by different manufacturers around the world. WHO recommends that a vaccine from the same manufacturer be used for both doses if you require two doses. This recommendation may be updated as further information becomes available.

2. Is there a regulatory body for the Covid-19 vaccines?

When it comes to COVID-19 vaccination regulation, there are numerous activities that are heavily influenced and monitored by WHO in conjunction with National Regulatory Agencies (NRAs). This is because WHO carries out vaccine prequalification to ensure that vaccines used in immunization programmes are safe and effective. As a result, more people can be vaccinated with safe, effective, and quality vaccines because immunization programme

managers can plan, select, and procure appropriate products. WHO applies international standards to evaluate and determine whether vaccines are safe and effective. They also ensure the continued safety and efficacy of prequalified vaccines through regular re-evaluation, site inspection, targeted testing and investigation of any product complaints or adverse events following immunization.

National Regulatory Agencies (NRAs) and National Control Laboratories (NCLs) play a vital role in vaccines regulation since they are responsible for regulatory oversight, testing and release of prequalified vaccines. NRAs of vaccine-importing countries must have a published set of requirements for licensing and demonstrate capacity to conduct surveillance of vaccine performance. This is achieved by supporting vaccine innovation and by providing technical support to vaccine manufacturers in collaboration with other organizations and networks.

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. Who should wear face masks?

Countries might have different recommendations on who needs to wear a face mask, it is important that you consult with your local MoH and follow the recommendations for your area. There may be some cases where some people are exempt from wearing a face mask. For example, the CDC doesn't recommend wearing face masks for children under 2 years of age, because they aren't capable of safely and appropriately using a face mask.

It may also not be mandatory to wear a face mask for people who have development disorders (e.g. autism, Asperger), disabilities, or other specific health conditions. But this should be decided by a medical provider first and on a on a case-by-case basis. For example, many people living with a disability or health condition such as asthma are still able to wear a face mask without difficulties.

Masks are a key measure to stop transmission and save lives, it should be used along with other preventative measures like physical distancing, avoiding crowded and closed areas, cleaning hands with soap and water, and covering sneezes and coughs.

4. Can vitamin B help alleviate COVID-19 symptoms?

It is important to be very clear that we currently have no early treatment proven to prevent or cure COVID-19. Vitamin B and all good nutrition habits can help to build and maintain a healthy immune system, which can potentially help to reduce or alleviate COVID-19 symptoms – but not the disease. Poor nutritional diets can lead to people getting infections more easily; so, a balanced diet is necessary to strength the immune system. Scientific studies investigate the possibility of B vitamins could improve breathing, prevent blood clots, and decrease mortality rate in COVID-19 patients. But, it's too soon to tell if there's a significant connection between vitamin B and COVID-19 outcomes.

Therefore, it is very important to follow the precautions set out to combat COVID-19, such as:

    A. Wearing a face mask
    B. Avoiding overcrowded areas
    C. Wash your hands frequently with soap and water
    D. Observing social distancing when in public
    E. When available, get vaccinated against the disease

These measures ensure that we remain safe during this pandemic.

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