



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. Are the COVID-19 vaccines effective against the new variants of the virus?

- First, we need to understand that viruses are constantly changing over time, this is a very normal process in a virus's life. As long as the virus continues to spread, variants will continue to appear.
- The main variants so far identified in the world have occurred in the United Kingdom, Brazil and South Africa, but have already spread around the globe. Each new variant is slightly different from the others and trusted experts and scientists are studying them quickly to understand if they will change the effectiveness of the vaccines.
- According to WHO, it is too early to tell if COVID-19 vaccines won't work with the new variants, as several research and scientific tests are still being carried out. At this moment, there are no conclusive or definitive results, and we must follow the progress of the next scientific evidence.
- It is also important to mention that scientists are already studying the development of booster vaccines for any variants which are resistant to the current vaccines available if needed.
- In other words, a given vaccine may show less efficacy in immunizing a target group with mild and moderate symptoms, but it may still be very effective in preventing severe cases. This means vaccines remain critical to containing the COVID-19 pandemic across the world.
- In addition, there is no evidence that these new strains are biologically different in ways that would require any change to the current recommendations for preventive measures. So, we should keep observing the same safety precautions, such as mask wearing, physical distancing and hand hygiene.
- 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>

2. Will there be a resurgence of COVID-19 cases?

How can we mitigate it?

- Once a disease has emerged, it is very difficult to fully eradicate it. Most diseases will stay with us for many, many years.
- As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread around the world, some countries have experienced greater numbers of cases arising again. Explanations for this new resurgence range from the levels of prevention adopted by individual countries, the level of compliance

with preventive measures at community levels, to the emergence of new variants that would be more transmissible - but not necessarily more lethal.

- Some countries in Africa have already started rolling out COVID-19 vaccines but we do not 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. The number of cases are likely to go down, but even if the pandemic slows down, smaller outbreaks of COVID-19 may continue to occur in certain locations or at specific times of the year, like a seasonal
- So, for the time being, everyone – even people who have been vaccinated against 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. How can we help stop misinformation and rumours from spreading?

- Since the start of the pandemic there has been a spread of fake or false information on the origins of the virus, who it affects and how serious the symptoms are. But rumours and myths can have severe consequences because it can be hard to know where to access trustworthy information.
- Misinformation can lead people to feeling afraid, paranoid and it can lead to stigmatisation of people who have been affected by COVID-19.
- So it is important that we keep ourselves well informed by using reliable sources of information. Here are some tips on how you can tell what information is reliable:
 - Check who the author of the information is – is the author an expert on the subject? Does the author use facts or is he or she just sharing their opinion?
 - Check where the information comes from. Trustworthy sources of information are for example, WHO, the Ministry of Health, and public health or humanitarian health organisations like the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, MSF and UN.

- Check the date of the information – when was the video or article made? Are the images used in the video or article current or was it taken from a different crisis or time?
- Check other sites to see if the same information was published there too. If it was, see how the information was treated in the other sites.
- Check whether the information is consistent by reading more than just the title. If there are inconsistencies in the information or images, treat this information as suspicious.
- If you suspect that the information you have found is fake do not share it with others because this will contribute to the spread of misinformation. Instead, you can correct rumours that you hear with facts from the reliable information you have found.
- Accurate information can save lives because we will know how to protect ourselves and others. For the most up to date information on COVID-19 and the pandemic you can visit the WHO website https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019?gclid=Cj0KCQjwk8b7BRCaARIsAARRTL7CdqoL7GHRTA7891MLY7dLG8IdNd3RT19dvt5DKoXY92HbVIZ_giAaArhKEALw_wcB

4. Why doesn't the Government provide schools with face masks?

- It is difficult to know why governments do not distribute face masks to children in schools because each country is different and will have its own limitations, resources and preventive policies in place. Also, it is logistically and financially very challenging for a government to provide every school with face masks.
- Medical face masks are very expensive, that is 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.
- Your local government may not be able to distribute protective equipment to every school but there are other ways that you can still follow the preventive measures. Across Africa, Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies are helping to prevent the spread of the outbreak by working with communities to help community members plan ways to prevent and manage outbreaks of COVID-19 in their area, for example 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.