



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 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 COVID-19.

1. Are the COVID-19 vaccines mandatory to take?

- The current WHO recommendation is that the COVID-19 vaccines should be administered on a voluntary basis, although the final decision rests with national government.
- While there are a few examples of countries that have pursued mandatory COVID-19 vaccination of their population or specific priority groups, such as frontline healthcare workers, the majority of nations follow the voluntary vaccination guideline by WHO.
- It is also important not to confuse the different concepts between *mandatory* and *forced* vaccination campaigns. When we talk about mandatory vaccinations, we are referring to policies adopted by a country to make the act of vaccination compulsory among its citizens by establishing restrictive measures to certain daily activities for those who choose not to be vaccinated. This might include travel restrictions or limitations to complete simple processes such as opening bank accounts, issuing or renewing personal documents, applying for public jobs, and other similar activities. Therefore, the concept of mandatory vaccination should not be confused with the generic idea that people would be forced to be vaccinated against their will, violating their physical integrity.
- It is critical to recognise that the consensus among scientists and the WHO is that, more importantly than talking about mandatory or non-mandatory COVID-19 vaccines, we should prioritise **clear information campaigns** based on **transparency** and **up to date scientific data**. This will help to ensure that people can **understand the importance of vaccination** as one of the most effective ways to halt this global pandemic.

2. How can we get vaccinated?

- As safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines are approved and being rolled out in many African countries already, it is recommended that you consult the direct guidance of your respective Ministry of Health for the most up-to-date information on the criteria, calendars and important details of the immunization plan in your respective country.
- Although each country is responsible for establishing its own vaccination criteria, WHO recommends giving priority for those groups most at risk of severe illness, death and exposure to COVID-19, such as frontline health workers, older people and people living with other diseases or existing conditions including hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, HIV or cancer.

- Most vaccination programmes in African countries have so far offered vaccines free of charge and given vaccines requiring two doses spaced at a certain time interval, which varies according to the manufacturer of the vaccine offered.
- There is a great effort of cooperation among countries and organisations to accelerate as much as possible the equitable distribution of vaccines to all, but vaccination campaigns require complex logistical work so that the vaccines are properly produced, transported, stored and applied to the population in accordance with all the necessary protocols. This process will most probably take several months before the minimum levels of immunisation in each country are reached.
- 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.
- In this sense, it is essential that you are closely following the main developments of the vaccination campaign in your country from the official channels of your Ministry of Health or similar bodies. Remember: COVID-19 vaccines work with your body's natural defences to help you safely develop immunity to the disease. This lowers your chances of getting the disease and suffering from their severe complications.

**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 effective are the lockdowns if cases continue to increase?

- The discussions and studies on the efficacy of lockdowns during the different phases of the pandemic have also generated much debate and a number of questions, particularly due to the profound negative socio-economic impacts on several vulnerable groups.
- We know without a doubt that large scale physical distancing measures and movement restrictions, often referred to as 'lockdowns', can slow COVID-19 transmission by limiting contact between people. However, according to WHO recommendations, lockdowns alone should not be the only strategy to counter the spread of the virus.
- Lockdowns have proven to be more effective at times when countries had to implement it as a short and sharp measure to stop COVID-19 running rampant, followed by a series of other activities such as testing, contact tracing and isolation; responding to disease clusters

and engaging with the public and promoting other preventive measures as handwashing and use of masks.

- So, if cases continue to increase, each country is responsible for considering, where possible, the intelligent use of lockdowns as one of the strategies available not to eliminate the virus, but to at least contain its spread in order to buy time to better structure their medical capacities and responses.
- WHO recommends governments to ease lockdown restrictions when they can:
 1. Ensure transmission is under control;
 2. Make sure health systems can care for every case — including tracing and isolating;
 3. Minimise risks in health facilities, including nursing or care homes;
 4. Have preventative measures in workplaces, schools and other essential places;
 5. Manage the risk of the virus being imported in from another place;
 6. Fully educate the community on the new normal, and how they can protect themselves.

4. Does having a fever or a cough mean you have COVID-19?

- The main three symptoms of COVID-19 so far widely recognised in the medical community are: cough, fever and fatigue. Other less common symptoms are shortness of breath, loss of taste or smell, diarrhoea, headache, nausea, congestion or runny nose.
- As we can see, most of these symptoms are very common and can occur in many conditions other than COVID-19, so having any of these symptoms **does not necessarily** mean that you have COVID-19.
- However, should you experience any of these symptoms it is strongly recommended that you immediately seek medical attention first by telephone or other forms of assistance that your local medical authority offers until a medical diagnosis is conclusive about your health condition.
- It is also recommended to follow the precautionary advice suggested by the WHO to stay home and self-isolate even if you have minor symptoms such as cough, headache or mild fever, until you recover. If you need to leave your house or have someone near you, wear a medical mask to avoid infecting others and keep a safe distance from at least 1 meter.

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.