



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. Will you be automatically tested for COVID-19 at hospitals?

- If you feel unwell and you are experiencing symptoms like fever, dry cough and/or difficulty breathing, you should call your Ministry of Health (MoH) or local healthcare provider for advice. They will tell you whether you should stay at home and self-isolate or whether you should go to a health facility for medical care.
- If the medical advice is to go to a health facility, they will test you for coronavirus in the hospital to confirm whether you have the virus.
- The test is very simple and nothing you should be afraid of. A swab is inserted inside your nose or throat, just deep enough to collect mucus that will be used to test whether you have an active infection. This may feel a little uncomfortable but will not harm you in anyway. The sample will then be carefully placed in a clean container and sealed so it can be tested either in the hospital or it will be transported to a laboratory.
- The doctor should tell you whether you have tested negative or positive for COVID-19. If you have **tested positive**, depending on the symptoms that you are experiencing you may be admitted to the hospital or you may be asked to recover at home and self-isolate until you have recovered. If it comes back **negative**, your doctor may want to do other tests to find out what is causing you to feel unwell.
- If you are not experiencing the above symptoms, but you need to go to a hospital for another medical condition, you may still be tested for COVID-19 even if you are not showing any signs or symptoms of COVID-19.
- This is because many people have COVID-19 but don't show symptoms (they are known as asymptomatic) and could still spread the virus to others.
- Hospitals may want to test the status of every patient in their facility so their team can safely care for them. They may also do the test for the safety and wellbeing of the healthcare staff and other patients.
- If you are experiencing a high fever, difficulty breathing and chest pain or pressure, these are severe symptoms of COVID-19 and you should call your MoH or local healthcare provider immediately so they can direct you to the appropriate health facility.

2. Could it be that COVID-19 was created in a laboratory?

- Since the beginning of the outbreak a myth that has persisted is that the virus originated in a laboratory.
- However, scientists who have studied the virus have found that it emerged naturally and spread to humans from an animal. Though the possible animal source of COVID-19 has not yet been confirmed but research is still ongoing to find out.
- How do scientists know then that it came from an animal? Viruses, like humans, have genetic material (DNA) and scientists can look at the DNA to find out where it came from. They compared it to the DNA of other coronaviruses, all of which came from animals, and found that the COVID-19 virus was very similar. Many diseases originated from animals, including Ebola, rabies, Anthrax, and Marburg virus disease, to name a few.
- If COVID-19 was made in a laboratory, researchers would have known this by looking at whether the DNA of the virus was changed but there were no signs it had been changed.
- Therefore, there is no evidence that proves that COVID-19 was created in a laboratory, all evidence points to an animal source as the cause for the new disease.

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. Has the outbreak ended?

- Unfortunately, the COVID-19 outbreak has not ended. In fact, the pandemic is still evolving.
- There are now over 18 million confirmed cases worldwide and nearly 1 million confirmed cases in the Africa Region, with South Africa currently the 5th worst affected country in the world.
- It is unlikely that the pandemic will end until an effective vaccine is found. Even if the number of cases start to fall, we would still be far from the end as there could be new outbreaks of COVID-19 in the future.
- Countries around the world have tried to contain the spread of the virus through measures such as lockdowns, quarantines, and curfews but this is not sustainable in the long term because of the social and economic damage that these measures cause.
- To help recover the economic losses, some countries are starting to lift restrictions, but this needs to be done safely and with time. As countries reopen, people are understandably excited to be able to go out and continue their normal activities. But there isn't an effective treatment or vaccine yet, so physical distancing, wearing of masks and handwashing need to continue to be followed despite reopening.
- As countries and businesses reopen, they might not see an immediate effect, such as the rise in the number of cases or deaths from COVID-19 because when a person is exposed to the virus it can take up to 14 days before they develop symptoms. Therefore, it could take several weeks after reopening before we see an impact on the number of cases.
- The spread of infection is unlikely to end until an effective vaccine is found but if everyone continues to wear masks, wash their hands and practise physical distancing, we can reduce the transmission of the virus and reopening's will have a much lower impact on COVID-19 case numbers.

4. Can the disease only be found in big cities?

- The virus has now spread to every country in the Africa region since the first case was confirmed in February and it has impacted cities and rural communities alike.
- Urban areas were the first to be affected because of a combination of factors: the population size in cities is usually larger, many businesses are based in cities, and there are higher levels of international travel and tourism. People living in urban areas may also have more access to COVID-19 testing, meaning cases here would be detected sooner than in rural areas. All these factors mean that urban areas are more vulnerable to disasters, including disease outbreaks.
- However, more cases of coronavirus are now appearing outside of urban areas and in rural communities.
- Many rural areas are isolated, households live in confined living spaces where physical distancing is not possible, and there is a lack of network connectivity. These areas may

have less access to healthcare or awareness of prevention measures. All these conditions contribute to the spreading of COVID-19 cases in rural areas.

- The outbreak in Africa is accelerating rapidly and we must act fast to control the spread of infection now. WHO estimates 29-44 million Africans could get infected within the first year of the pandemic, if people don't follow the prevention measures. This number of cases would overwhelm medical services and health care workers, causing a severe strain in countries.
- We can still stop the virus from spreading quickly if we practise the 5 simple rules of COVID-19 prevention seen on page 2.

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