



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. Have some masks been deliberately infected with COVID-19?

- No, face masks are not being deliberately infected with COVID-19.
- Stories of contaminated face masks have been circulating on social media, but when the source of these stories has been investigated, they have all turned out to be false. For example, see this fact checking [article on the BBC](#).
- It would be very difficult to contaminate a face mask with COVID-19 as the virus does not live on paper or fabric surfaces for very long. So, by the time the contaminated masks were made, packaged, shipped to their destination, and sold to customers, the virus would have died and would not be able to infect the wearer anymore.
- No Ministry of Health or the WHO have reported any examples or evidence of infected face masks in Africa.
- Just be careful not to touch the front of the mask while wearing it, and always clean your hands with soap and water or hand sanitizer before and after you take it off.

## 2. Do couples have to practice physical distancing?

- No, couples living together in the same house do not need to physically distance – unless you suspect one of you might have COVID-19. The symptoms of COVID-19 are a dry cough, fever and shortness of breath.
- If you are a couple not living together, you do not have to physically distance unless your Government has instructed people to only have contact with people in their own household OR you suspect one of you might have COVID-19.
- However, it is a good idea for couples to limit their contact with other people and avoid crowded places as much as possible. This is because COVID-19 spreads from person to person so the less people you are in contact with, the less chance you have of catching the virus, and then passing it on to each other.
- If you do suspect one of you may have COVID-19, call your Ministry of Health hotline, a local hospital or doctor to ask for advice.

## 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. Is loss of taste a symptom of COVID-19?

- Yes, the sudden loss of taste and also smell can be a symptom of COVID-19.
- The most common symptoms are fever, dry cough, and tiredness.
- Less common symptoms include aches and pains, a blocked nose, headache, eye infections, sore throat, diarrhoea, loss of taste or smell, a skin rash or changes in skin colour on the fingers or toes.
- Loss of taste and smell can also be a sign of other infections, such as the common cold or flu so it does not mean you definitely have COVID-19. However, if you also have other common symptoms such as a fever and dry cough you should call your Ministry of Health hotline, a local hospital or doctor to ask for advice.
- If you think you might have COVID-19, the most important thing is that you do not have contact with other people. This will stop you from accidentally passing the virus on to family, friends and others and help end this outbreak as soon as possible.
- If your symptoms are mild, you can self-isolate at home for 14 days. This means you have to stay in a separate room if possible and keep a distance of at least 2m to all other household members. Wear a medical mask when talking to other members of your household and don't share utensils, towels, glasses or bottles.
- If your symptoms are more serious, such as a high fever or difficulty breathing, you might need medical care so call the Ministry of Health hotline or hospital for advice.

## 4. Why are masks and hand sanitizers not provided to everyone?

- Governments and humanitarian agencies do not have the financial and human resources to be able buy and distribute hand sanitizer and masks to everyone in the population.
- This would require huge sums of money and thousands of people to make this happen.
- Those responding to COVID-19 have limited resources and need to make difficult choices about where funding should be spent. For example, should it be spent on health services, supporting people who have lost their income, or providing hand sanitizer and masks?
- For most people, buying soap and a fabric mask is something they can take care of themselves.
- To save money:
  - You don't actually need to use hand sanitizer, which is more expensive than soap. Washing your hands with soap and water is the best and most effective way to clean your hands. You do not need to use a special type of soap – any liquid or hard soap will do. In Malawi, households are repurposing small pieces of soap left over from used bars to use for handwashing.
  - Don't use the medical, surgical, or blue masks. These can only be used once so you need to buy a new one for each wear.
  - Instead use a cloth mask which can be washed and reused so is a cheaper option.
  - You can even make your own cloth mask using left over material. Just make sure it covers the nose, mouth, and chin, is secured with elastic loops or ties around the ear or head, has more than one layer of fabric and is washable.