

# COVID-19 Stigma & Discrimination: Should we be scared of people who have had COVID-19?

Community feedback indicates stigma against people who have had COVID-19 is increasing, including against those who are perceived as being at risk of spreading the virus such as healthcare workers or those wearing face masks. Comments collected include: *"If the man who is suspected of having COVID-19 returns to our community he will be killed as he risks infecting the whole community"* and *"When it comes to HIV once it is infected it is forever because it has no cure. Now in this case of corona virus how does that work?"*, and *"Are those recovered still carrying the virus or not?"*. A survey by UNICEF in Kenya also found a high proportion of people believed others would stop talking to them (85% vs 74% of men) and treat them badly (77% vs 66% men) if they became infected with COVID-19. If left unaddressed, these beliefs could lead people to people to hide symptoms, refuse to get tested or delay in seeking medical care, because they are scared of how others will treat them. If people hide cases of COVID-19 and refuse testing and treatment this will contribute to rising infections and deaths. The fear of stigma and discrimination is also affecting people's willingness to share their stories of being affected by COVID-19 and so contributing to the belief that the virus is not real or only affects famous people or politicians.

This factsheet is designed to help those working with communities to provide the facts to those who express fear and stigma of people who have recovered from COVID-19.

## Can you recover from COVID-19?

- Yes, people can fully recover from COVID-19. COVID-19 positive status IS NOT permanent or a death sentence. Just as a person can recover from a cold or flu, they can also recover from COVID-19. This is because the body's immune system will always try to fight off viruses that enter the system.
- In Africa, more than half of those who got infected have fully recovered and on average, less than 3 out of every 100 people have died from the disease. Those who have recovered from the disease can get back to their normal lives. To do this they need the support of everyone at home and in their community.
- Most people who catch COVID-19 will be able to recover at home, with plenty of rest, water and some paracetamol to relieve a sore throat, headache or fever. However, if you have difficulties breathing or a very high fever it is important to call your Ministry of Health hotline or local healthcare facility for advice.
- Most people with mild symptoms will recover from COVID-19 within two weeks. For those who become more seriously ill, it could take six weeks or more to fully recover.

## Can people who have recovered from COVID-19 infect others?

- Current evidence shows that once a person has fully recovered from COVID-19 and the virus has left their body they are no longer infectious to other people.
- A person with confirmed COVID-19 or COVID-19 symptoms should stay in self-quarantine at home for 14 days before freely interacting with others.
- A safe rule is to say a person is no longer infectious once these three conditions have been achieved;
  - Their symptoms have improved
  - They have not had a fever for three days
  - It has been at least 10 days since their symptoms first started.

## How should we treat people who have recovered from COVID-19?

- Many people returning home from isolation or quarantine after recovery face hostility from the community and are sometimes sent away as people fear that they may still transmit the disease.
- This is very dangerous as it could lead people to hide symptoms, refuse to get tested or delay in seeking medical care, because they are scared of how others will treat them. This could contribute to increasing the spread of the virus at community level and lead to more cases and deaths.
- People who have fully recovered from COVID-19 are no longer infectious. They should be supported and welcomed back by family, friends and community members and celebrated as heroes who have fought a good fight and beaten COVID-19.
- Work with community leaders and influencers to address fear and stigma and provide a safe platform for people to share experiences as proof that COVID-19 is real and can be overcome.

## Once recovered from COVID-19, can you be infected again?

- We don't yet know the answer to this question. However, just as people can catch a cold or the flu more than once, it may also be possible that if you have COVID-19 once, you can catch it again in the future.
- Normally when we catch a virus, our bodies will develop a defence system against catching the same virus again. But how long that defence system lasts differs from disease to disease. Sometimes we can be immune for life and other times it only lasts for a few weeks or months.
- The hope is that a recovered patient has developed the ability to fight off a second COVID-19 infection.

## Do people wearing masks have COVID-19?

- No, not everyone wearing a face mask has COVID-19. Many people have made a personal choice to wear a face mask to protect themselves, loved ones and contribute towards stopping the infection in their communities.
- In some countries, like Kenya for example, the Government has even instructed everyone to wear masks in public places because they believe it will help slow the spread of virus.
- Healthcare workers in clinics and hospitals should also wear a face mask to protect themselves from catching COVID-19 from their patients. This will ensure they stay healthy and can keep providing care to those who need it.
- Anyone who is caring for someone at home who is sick and might have coronavirus should also wear a mask to protect themselves. And if someone does have coronavirus, wearing a face mask can prevent them from infecting other people.

## How can we stay safe?

- The virus spreads from person to person so try to limit your contact with other people. Stay home and avoid crowded places. If you do go out, try to keep a safe one meter distance from others and avoid shaking hands, holding hands, cheek kisses or hugs.
- Clean your hands regularly with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Don't touch your eyes, nose and mouth as this increases the chance of passing the virus into your body.
- Wear a cloth face mask correctly in crowded places or where physical distancing is difficult.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your bent elbow when you cough or sneeze.
- Stay home and self-isolate even with minor symptoms such as cough, headache, mild fever, until you recover. If you need to leave your house, wear a mask to avoid infecting others. Contact your local health services or Ministry of Health hotline for advice on what to do.

- If you suspect you have COVID-19, keep a safe one meter distance from others and don't share plates, cutlery, glasses, bottles or towels and wash these thoroughly with soap and water after you've used them.

## Key messages

- COVID-19 is not permanent or life-long virus. You can recover naturally from COVID-19, the same way you can recover from a cold or flu infection. However, should you develop more serious symptoms such as difficulties breathing or a very high fever it is important to call your Ministry of Health hotline or local healthcare facility early so you can get the medical care you need to give you the best chance of recovery.
- People who have recovered from COVID-19 are not infectious anymore and cannot spread the virus to others. Do not be afraid of people who've had COVID-19, they are no risk to you or their community.
- There is a lot of confusion, anxiety, and fear associated with COVID-19. This is understandable because it is a new disease, but unfortunately, this is causing some people to be scared of and discriminate against anyone who has had COVID-19 or anyone they think might have the virus.
- Discriminating against or reacting negatively to people who have recovered from COVID-19 could lead people to hide symptoms, refuse to get tested or delay in seeking medical care, because they are scared of how they will be treated. If people hide the virus it will more quickly and lead to even more deaths.
- Don't spread fear and stigma. Instead, help stop this disease by showing empathy and kindness to those affected and welcome people who have recovered back into the family and community and celebrate them as heroes who have won the battle against COVID-19.

## Recommendations

1. Carry out focus group discussions or key informant interviews to understand the reasons for fear and stigma and what information or approaches would help to address this most effectively.
2. Engage communities to agree and implement practical preventive measures based on the local context. Use the [interagency guidance note](#).
3. Share this factsheet with your staff and social mobilizers so they are equipped to respond effectively to community members who express fear, stigma, or discrimination against COVID-19 survivors.
4. Actively address stigma during social mobilisation activities and tackle the issue through a cultural perspective, working with religious, community leaders, including women's groups, youth groups etc.
5. Stigma needs to be addressed first, for people to be willing to admit publicly they have had COVID-19. Ask respected and influential people in the community, such as community or religious leaders and medical staff, who may feel more confident share their stories first of surviving COVID-19. Make sure to assess the risks beforehand to avoid putting people at risk of discrimination and harm.
6. Share guidance and tips on psychosocial support with social mobilizers, making sure they are aware and equipped to address communities fear and refer them to the right places. [Use the interagency guidance](#).
7. Enlist the support of local and national media to address fear, stigma, and discrimination through their reporting, for example by holding media webinars on the topic.
8. There are lots of risk communication and community engagement resources to help you address stigma including:
  - An IFRC, UNICEF and WHO guide on addressing stigma
  - The African Council of Religious Leaders guide ['Communicating to End Misinformation, Discrimination and to In-still Hope - mental and spiritual health, misinformation and rumours, stigma and discrimination'](#)
  - Videos from the IFRC on [recovery](#) and [addressing stigma](#) in English and on [recovery in French](#)
  - A short [cartoon on stigma and discrimination](#) from ICRC.