health
Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNICABLE DISEASES
Division of the National Health Laboratory Service

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COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is a coronavirus?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses which may cause illness in animals or humans. In humans, several coronaviruses are known to cause respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The most recently discovered coronavirus causes coronavirus disease COVID-19.

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is the infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus. This new virus and disease were unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019.

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, tiredness, and dry cough. Some patients may have aches and pains, nasal congestion, runny nose, sore throat or diarrhoea. These symptoms are usually mild and begin gradually. Some people become infected but do not develop any symptoms and do not feel unwell. Most people (about 80 per cent) recover from the disease without needing special treatment. Around one out of every six people who gets COVID-19 becomes seriously ill and develops difficulty breathing. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like high blood pressure, heart problems or diabetes, are more likely to develop serious illness. About two per cent of people with the disease have died. People with fever, cough and difficulty breathing should seek medical attention.

How does COVID-19 spread?

People can catch COVID-19 from others who have the virus. The disease can spread from person to person through small droplets from the nose or mouth which are spread when a person with COVID-19 coughs or exhales. These droplets land on objects and surfaces around the person. Other people then catch COVID-19 by touching these objects or surfaces, then touching their eyes, nose or mouth. People can also catch COVID-19 if they breathe in droplets from a person with COVID-19 who coughs out or exhales droplets. This is why it is important to stay more than one meter away from a person who is sick.

Can the virus that causes COVID-19 be transmitted through the air?

Studies to date suggest that the virus that causes COVID-19 is mainly transmitted through contact with respiratory droplets rather than through the air.

Can CoVID-19 be caught from a person who has no symptoms?

The main way the disease spreads is through respiratory droplets expelled by someone who is coughing. The risk of catching COVID-19 from someone with no symptoms at all is very low. However, many people with COVID-19 experience only mild symptoms. This is particularly true at the early stages of the disease. It is therefore possible to catch COVID-19 from someone who has, for example, just a mild cough and does not feel ill.

Can I catch COVID-19 from the faeces of someone with the disease?

The risk of catching COVID-19 from the faeces of an infected person appears to be low. While initial investigations suggest the virus may be present in faeces in some cases, spread through this route is not a main feature of the outbreak. Because this is a risk, however, it is another reason to clean hands regularly, after using the bathroom and before eating.

What can I do to protect myself and prevent the spread of disease?

Protection measures for everyone

Stay aware of the latest information on the COVID-19 outbreak, available on the websites and social media of the national Department of Health (www.health.gov.za), National Institute for Communicable Diseases (www.nicd.ac.za) and World Health Organization (www.who.int).

Most people who become infected will experience mild illness and recover, but it can be more severe for others. Take care of your health and protect others by doing the following:

- Regularly and thoroughly wash your hands with soap and water or clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand sanitiser. Why? Washing your hands with soap and water or using alcohol-based hand sanitiser kills viruses that may be on your hands.
- Maintain at least one meter distance between yourself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing. Why? When someone coughs or sneezes they spray small liquid droplets from their nose or mouth which may contain a virus. If you are too close, you can breathe in the droplets, including the COVID-19 virus if the person coughing has the disease.
- Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth. Why? Hands touch many surfaces and can pick up viruses. Once contaminated, hands can transfer the virus to your eyes, nose or mouth. From there, the virus can enter your body and can make you sick.
- Make sure you, and the people around you, follow good respiratory hygiene. This means covering your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze. Then dispose of the used

tissue immediately. Why? Droplets spread viruses. By following good respiratory hygiene you protect the people around you from viruses such as cold, flu and COVID-19.

- Stay home if you feel unwell. If you have a fever, cough and difficulty breathing, seek medical attention and call in advance. Follow the directions of your local health facility. Why? The national and provincial Departments of Health will have the most up to date information on the situation in your area. Calling in advance will allow your healthcare provider to quickly direct you to the right health facility. This will also protect you and help prevent spread of viruses and other infections.
- Stay informed on the latest developments about COVID-19. Follow advice given by your healthcare provider and the national Department of Health on how to protect yourself and others from COVID-19. Why? National and local authorities will have the most up to date information on whether COVID-19 is spreading in your area. They are best placed to advise on what people in your area should be doing to protect themselves.

Protection measures for persons who are in or have recently visited (past 14 days) areas where COVID-19 is spreading

- Stay at home if you begin to feel unwell, even with mild symptoms such as headache and slight runny nose, until you recover. Why? Avoiding contact with others and visits to medical facilities will allow these facilities to operate more effectively and help protect you and others from possible COVID-19 and other viruses.
- If you develop fever, cough and difficulty breathing, seek medical advice promptly as this may be due to a respiratory infection or other serious condition. Call in advance and tell your provider of any recent travel or contact with travellers. Why? Calling in advance will allow your healthcare provider to quickly direct you to the right health facility. This will also help to prevent possible spread of COVID-19 and other viruses.

How likely am I to catch COVID-19?

The risk depends on where you live or where you have travelled recently. The risk of infection is higher in areas where a number people have been diagnosed with COVID-19. More than 95 per cent of all COVID-19 cases are occurring in China, with the majority of those in Hubei Province. The risk in South Africa is currently low, however, it important to be aware of the situation and preparedness efforts in your area.

Should I worry about COVID-19?

If you are not in an area where COVID-19 is spreading, or if you have not travelled from one of those areas or have not been in close contact with someone who has and is feeling unwell, your chances of getting it are currently low. However, it is understandable that you may feel stressed and anxious about the situation. It is a good idea to get the facts to help you accurately determine your risks so that you can take reasonable precautions. Your healthcare provider, the National Department of Health and the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) are all sources of accurate information on COVID-19. It is important to be informed of the situation where you live and take appropriate measures to protect yourself.

If there is an outbreak of COVID-19 in South Africa and you are in an area where there are cases of COVID-19 you need to take the risk of infection seriously. Follow the advice issued by national and local Departments of Health. Although for most people COVID-19 causes only mild illness, it can make some people very ill. More rarely, the disease can be fatal. Older people, and those with pre-existing medical conditions (such as high blood pressure, heart problems or diabetes) appear to be more vulnerable.

Who is at risk of developing severe illness?

While we are still learning about how COVID-2019 affects people, older persons and persons with pre-existing medical conditions (such as high blood pressure, heart disease, or diabetes) appear to develop serious illness more often than others.

Are antibiotics effective in preventing or treating the COVID-19?

No. Antibiotics do not work against viruses, they only work on bacterial infections. COVID-19 is caused by a virus, so antibiotics do not work. Antibiotics should not be used as a means of prevention or treatment of COVID-19. They should only be used as directed by a physician to treat a bacterial infection.

Is there a vaccine, drug or treatment for COVID-19?

Not yet. To date, there is no vaccine and no specific antiviral medicine to prevent or treat COVID-2019. However, those affected should receive care to relieve symptoms. People with serious illness should be hospitalised. Most patients recover thanks to supportive care.

Possible vaccines and some specific drug treatments are under investigation. They are being tested through clinical trials. The World Health Organization (WHO) is coordinating efforts to develop vaccines and medicines to prevent and treat COVID-19.

The most effective ways to protect yourself and others against COVID-19 are to frequently clean your hands, cover your cough with the bend of elbow or tissue, and maintain a distance of at least one meter from people who are coughing or sneezing.

Should I wear a mask to protect myself?

People with no respiratory symptoms, such as cough, do not need to wear a mask. The WHO recommends the use of masks for people who have symptoms of COVID-19 and for those caring for individuals who have symptoms, such as cough and fever. The use of masks is crucial for health workers and people who are taking care of someone (at home or in a healthcare facility).

The most effective ways to protect yourself and others against COVID-19 are to frequently clean your hands, cover your cough with the bend of elbow or tissue and maintain a distance of at least one meter from people who are coughing or sneezing.

How long is the incubation period for COVID-19?

The “incubation period” means the time between catching the virus and beginning to have symptoms of the disease. Most estimates of the incubation period for COVID-19 range from 1-14 days, most commonly around five days.

How long does the virus survive on surfaces?

It is not certain how long the virus that causes COVID-19 survives on surfaces, but it seems to behave like other coronaviruses. Studies suggest that coronaviruses (including preliminary information on the COVID-19 virus) may persist on surfaces for a few hours or up to several days. This may vary under different conditions (e.g. type of surface, temperature or humidity of the environment).

If you think a surface may be infected, clean it with simple disinfectant to kill the virus and protect yourself and others. Wash your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitiser. Avoid touching your eyes, mouth, or nose.

Is it safe to receive a package from any area where COVID-19 has been reported?

Yes. The likelihood of an infected person contaminating commercial goods is low and the risk of catching the virus that causes COVID-19 from a package that has been moved, travelled, and exposed to different conditions and temperature is also low.

Is there anything I should not do?

The following measures **ARE NOT** effective against COVID-2019 and can be harmful:

- smoking
- taking traditional herbal remedies
- wearing multiple masks
- taking self-medication such as antibiotics

In any case, if you have fever, cough and difficulty breathing seek medical care early to reduce the risk of developing a more severe infection and be sure to share your recent travel history with your healthcare provider.

COVID-19 Hotline: 0800 029 999