

COVID-19 (Coronavirus)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q What is coronavirus (COVID-19)?

A 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.

Q Does the coronavirus spread from person to person?

A The virus can spread from one person to another, mainly through droplets of saliva or mucus carried through the air for up to 1 metre or so when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Viral particles may be breathed in, land on surfaces that people touch, or be transferred when shaking hands or sharing a drink with someone who has the virus.

Q What is the incubation period for the coronavirus?

A An incubation period is the time between being infected by a virus and showing symptoms of the illness. Current information suggests that symptoms of COVID-19 usually appear on average after five days from infection. However, the incubation period may be as short as two days or as long as 14 days before the infected person shows symptoms.

Q What are the symptoms of the new coronavirus?

A General symptoms:

- Fever
- Dry cough
- Trouble breathing
- Sore throat

It is possible that gastrointestinal symptoms (nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea) can occur before respiratory symptoms occur. However, it is primarily a respiratory virus.

Those who have the virus may have no obvious symptoms (be asymptomatic) or symptoms ranging from mild to severe. In some cases, the virus can cause pneumonia and be potentially life-threatening.

PLEASE NOTE: Most people who get sick will recover from COVID-19 – 80% of positive patients will have mild symptoms which are flu-like and will not require hospitalisation. Recovery time varies and, for people who are not severely ill, may be similar to a general flu-like episode. People with mild symptoms may recover within a few days. People who have pneumonia may take longer to recover (days to weeks). In cases of severe, life-threatening illness, it may take months for a person to recover. People who are already severely ill and contract the virus have the highest risk of being fatally affected.

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Q How is this new coronavirus confirmed?

A A specialised test must be done to confirm that a person has COVID-19. **However, it is important to note that only persons who show symptoms or meet criteria as set out by the NICD will be tested.** If you or a loved one have suspected symptoms, please contact your general practitioner first, who will liaise with the necessary authorities to assist with tests. In cases of severe respiratory distress, please go to your emergency unit. However, inform them of your arrival prior to entering the unit.

Q Can people who are asymptomatic spread coronavirus?

A A person who is asymptomatic may be spreading the virus and could make others ill. How often this lasts if asymptomatic transmission is occurring is unclear. The risk of catching the virus from someone with no symptoms, is very low.

Q Can the coronavirus live on surfaces such as fabrics and carpets or hard surfaces?

A How long the new coronavirus can live on a soft surface — and more importantly, how easy or hard it is to spread this way — isn't clear yet. Available evidence suggests it can be transmitted less easily from soft surfaces than frequently-touched hard surfaces, such as a doorknob or the elevator button.

According to WHO, coronaviruses may survive on surfaces for just a few hours or several days. However, many factors will influence this period, including the surface material and weather.

This is the reason why taking personal hygiene steps such as frequently washing your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitiser, and wiping down often-touched surfaces with disinfectants or a household cleaning spray, are excellent infection prevention practices.

Q Should my children and I wear a face mask to protect against coronavirus?

A Please follow public health recommendations. Currently, face masks are not recommended for the general public. Even though there are confirmed cases of COVID-19 in South Africa, most people are more likely to catch and spread seasonal influenza (the flu).

Some health facilities require people to wear a mask under certain circumstances, such as if they have travelled from areas where coronavirus is spreading, or have been in contact with people who did or with people who have confirmed coronavirus.

If you have respiratory symptoms like coughing or sneezing, experts recommend wearing a mask to protect others. This may help contain droplets containing any type of virus, including the flu, and protect close contacts (anyone within 1 to 2 meters of the infected person).

Q Should someone who is immunocompromised wear a mask?

A If you are immunocompromised because of an illness or treatment, talk to your doctor about whether wearing a mask is helpful. Advice will depend on your medical history and where you live. Many people will not need to wear a mask, but if your healthcare provider recommends wearing one in public areas because you have a particularly vulnerable immune system or for other reasons, follow that advice.

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Q Should I travel on a plane?

A Keep abreast of any travel advisories from regulatory agencies and understand that this is a rapidly changing situation.

If anyone has a fever and respiratory symptoms, that person should not fly if at all possible. Anyone who has a fever and respiratory symptoms and flies should wear a mask on an aeroplane anyway.

Q Is there a vaccine available for coronavirus?

A No vaccine is available, although scientists are working on vaccines. In 2003, scientists tried to develop a vaccine to prevent the SARS virus but the epidemic ended before the vaccine could enter clinical trials.

Q What is the treatment for coronavirus?

A Treatment is based on supportive measures, which means giving fluids, medicine to reduce fever, and, in severe cases, supplemental oxygen. People who become critically ill from COVID-19 may need a ventilator to help them breathe.

Q What should I do if I think I or a loved one has contracted the coronavirus?

A If you have a general practitioner, call them first for advice. It is far more likely to be the seasonal flu or another viral illness.

If you do not have a doctor and you are concerned that you or your child may have coronavirus, contact your local hospital for assistance or advice.

Only people with symptoms of severe respiratory illness should go to their nearest emergency unit. Severe symptoms are rapid heart rate, low blood pressure, high or very low temperatures, confusion, trouble breathing and severe dehydration. However, inform them of your arrival prior to entering the unit.

Q Can people who recover from the coronavirus still be carriers and therefore spread it?

A People who get COVID-19 need to work with providers and public health authorities to determine when they are no longer contagious.

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HOW CAN I REDUCE MY CHANCES OF BEING INFECTED OR SPREADING COVID-19?

Implement these simple precautions outlined by the World Health Organization:

- Regularly and thoroughly clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water.

Why? Washing your hands with soap and water or using alcohol-based hand rub kills viruses that may be on your hands.

- Maintain at least 1 metre (3 feet) distance between yourself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing.

Why? When someone coughs or sneezes they spray small droplets from their nose or mouth which may contain the 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 your 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 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 and wash your hands.

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 the healthcare authorities in advance. Follow the directions of your local health authority.

Why? National and local authorities will have the most up to date information on the situation in your area. Calling in advance will allow your health care 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 the advice given by your healthcare provider or your national and local public health authority 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 or not COVID-19 is spreading in your area. They are best-placed to advise you on what people in your area should be doing to protect themselves.

- Keep up to date on the latest COVID-19 hotspots (cities or local areas where COVID-19 is spreading widely). If possible, avoid travelling to places – especially if you are an older person or have diabetes, heart or lung disease.

Why? You have a higher chance of catching COVID-19 in one of these areas.

For any further queries and questions with regard to COVID-19 – please contact the National Institute of Communicable Diseases' (NICD) 24-hour consumer toll-free hotline number: 0800 029 999 or visit the NICD website: <http://www.nicd.ac.za/diseases-a-z-index/covid-19/>

Sources:

- <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>
- <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/as-coronavirus-spreads-many-questions-and-some-answers-2020022719004>