

Guidance on using this document:

This document may be used as a guidance for individuals or organizations (e.g. public health officials, NGO field staff) who interact with the public (e.g. community members) so that they are prepared to clarify any misinformation they hear. In using this document, take care not to reinforce misinformation and rumours by repeating them.

Some people feel that the coronavirus is over and that we can return to 'normal' times and behaviour. Unfortunately, this is not over. There is a real and continuous risk of spreading the virus in the community, especially in large indoor gatherings. Follow this advice.

Key Prevention Message: It is critical that the following message about prevention be shared in its entirety as follows: To protect yourself, make sure you clean your hands frequently and thoroughly and avoid touching your eyes, mouth, and nose. Handwashing with soap, wearing a mask and keeping a physical distance of 1m are the number one steps recommended by health professionals to protect individuals and help prevent spreading the virus to others. People with severe symptoms may be treated in hospital with equipment that helps them breath, however most people are able to recover from the symptoms without this level of treatment. If you feel sick with mild symptoms, stay at home in isolation and strictly avoid sharing space with other members of the family for at least 15 days. The same is true if one of your family members are affected because you may also have the virus. Call the national Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) hotline on 166 or your provincial MoPH hotline if you need more information.

It is important that you continue to use medical services for regular health check ups and treatments, including for vaccinations, ante-natal care, diabetes or high blood pressure and to ensure the safe delivery of babies.

The rumour response plan and strategy, and dissemination of the information in this document is to be comprehensive and determined by the RCCE Working Group.

Recommended responses to common misconceptions from WHO:

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>

Guidance on language use:

https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/TWB_PolicyBrief-COVID19.pdf

Guidance on social stigma and overcoming it:

<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/covid19-stigma-guide.pdf>

1. CAUSES, CURES & TREATMENTS

Most people who are diagnosed with COVID-19 have mild or moderate symptoms and can recover thanks to supportive care. If you contract the virus, make sure you rest, treat your symptoms and self-isolate to protect others from contracting it from you. If you have cough, fever, and difficulty breathing, you should seek medical care – but call your health facility by telephone first. *For more information related to treatment of the virus, call the national MoPH hotline on 166 or your provincial MoPH hotline.*

Drinking black tea will cure Covid-19.

Drinking ethanol and other miracle cures will cure Covid-19.

Drinking water washes coronavirus down into your stomach and stomachs acid can kill it.

Drinking warm water prevents you from getting the virus.

Answer: According to the World Health Organisation, to date, there is no vaccine and no specific medicine to prevent or treat the new coronavirus (2019-nCoV). Those infected with the virus should receive appropriate care to relieve and treat symptoms, and those with severe symptoms should receive optimized medical care. People with severe symptoms may be treated in hospital with equipment that helps them breath, however most people are able to recover from the symptoms without this level of treatment. Some specific treatments are under investigation and are being actively tested through clinical trials which have now advanced to animal and human trials. WHO and governments around the world are undertaking research to understand the virus and try to develop treatments and vaccines. Many pharmaceutical and natural medicines have been used throughout history to treat and cure colds and flus and infections. Drinking water, lemon and other forms of natural/fresh juice (no additives), tea, honey and other healthy substances can generally help and sometimes improve our immunity. Some social media messages have indicated that drinking warm liquids or water with herbs helps dislodge or kill the virus in the throat, however health experts warn that no evidence has been found to support this claim.

Keeping a healthy diet and lifestyle, drinking water, tea with lemon and eating fruits and vegetables may help improve your general health, immunity and your ability to fight all kinds of illnesses. But there is no guarantee or scientific evidence that these things will protect you from COVID-19. The most important way is through social distancing and hygiene. Making sure that you clean your hands frequently and thoroughly and avoid touching your eyes, mouth, and nose. Handwashing with soap, wearing a mask over your mouth and nose, and keeping a physical distance of at least 1.5 meters from other people are the number one steps recommended by health professionals to protect individuals and help prevent spreading the virus to others. *For more information related to treatment of the virus, call the national MoPH hotline on 166 or your provincial MoPH hotline.*

Drinking ethanol will cure Covid-19.

Answer: Drinking alcohol or ethanol cannot kill or cure the coronavirus. Pure alcohol (ethanol) and other products like bleach and disinfectant are used to clean and disinfect surfaces and should not be ingested. They

can cause illness or even death as a result of poisoning if you drink them. To protect yourself, make sure you clean your hands frequently and thoroughly and avoid touching your eyes, mouth, and nose. Handwashing with soap, wearing a mask over your mouth and nose, and keeping a physical distance of at least 1.5 meters from other people are the number one steps recommended by health professionals to protect individuals and help prevent spreading the virus to others. *For more information related to treatment of the virus, call the national MoPH hotline on 166 or your provincial MoPH hotline.*

Due to the extreme hot weather conditions, the virus will not affect the Eastern region.

Some people say that because the weather in Herat is warm and sunny, people won't develop severe symptoms.

Answer: You can contract COVID-19, no matter how warm or sunny the weather is. Many countries with warm weather have reported cases of COVID-19. The coronavirus known as COVID-19 is part of a family of viruses that can affect people more during the cold weather and winter season. Therefore, it was originally thought that the warm weather may limit the spread of the virus. There is currently no evidence to prove this. At this stage, it is important to take precautions and actions to prevent the spread of the virus. To protect yourself, make sure you clean your hands frequently and thoroughly and avoid touching your eyes, mouth, and nose. Handwashing with soap, wearing a mask over your mouth and nose, and keeping a physical distance of at least 1.5 meters from other people are the number one steps recommended by health professionals to protect individuals and help prevent spreading the virus to others.

Covid-19 can be treated by non-western medicine.

Answer: According to the World Health Organisation, to date, no vaccine nor specific medicine, including pharmaceutical and herbal medicines, has been proven to prevent or treat the new coronavirus (COVID-19). Those infected with the virus should receive appropriate care to relieve and treat symptoms, and those with severe symptoms should receive optimized medical care. People with severe symptoms may be treated in hospital with equipment that helps them breathe, however most people are able to recover from the symptoms without this level of treatment. *For more information related to treatment of the virus, call the national MoPH hotline on 166 or your provincial MoPH hotline.*

2. IMMUNITY, CAUSES & TREATMENTS WITH RELIGIOUS REFERENCES

In addition to recommendations from WHO and Ministry of Public Health, this Islamic guidance may be helpful when responding to belief in the immunity of Muslims: Massive epidemics have affected Muslims throughout history, from the times of the companions of the Prophet. If Muslims were not affected by pandemics, there would be no practical divine instructions to them about how to protect themselves from pandemics. Is quite clear in Islamic law. This is why numerous sahih hadiths refer to pandemics and how to protect the community from them. For example, avoiding going to places where the infection exists. (Reference, Şaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: 5728; Şaḥīḥ Muslim: 2218). Another one of the sayings of the Prophet could be

added to some of the answers, which says *Cleanliness is half of e'maan/faith*: (Sahi Muslim 223). The saying is used a lot in local languages (Pashto and Dari). Also relevant, *do not place a sick patient with a healthy person*: Sahih al-Bukhari.

A mullah in Ab-Kamary district, Badghis can provide a ta'wiz (amulet) to protect people from the virus.

Answer: During times of crisis, faith remains a fundamental part of life and community practice. In addition to observing religious practices during health crises, it is important to follow health professionals' advice and take precautions to prevent infection and to avoid further spreading the virus within our communities. Handwashing with soap, wearing a mask over your mouth and nose, and keeping a physical distance of 1.5m are the number one steps recommended by health professionals to protect individuals and help prevent spreading the virus to others. Handwashing with soap during the five prayers will reduce the chances of further transmission. Additional steps are also recommended such as; avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth if your hands are not clean; practice physical distancing and stay at home if you feel unwell.

Visiting the shrine of Khwaja Qasim, in Badghis, will protect you from the virus.

Answer: Muslims rely on both physical responsive efforts and praying when faced with problems such as diseases or failing in life affairs. Both are complementary for each other and can't be considered as replacement for the other. Visiting holy places may help you feel calm but at the same time you need to take precautions and follow medical advice to protect your body against this virus and seek treatment if you are sick.

Optional guidance about visiting shrines: It is important to draw on faith in these times, but it is recommended to avoid gatherings altogether. In these times it is a risk to visit crowded places. If the shrine is visited, it might be safer to circumambulate it a number of times, without touching or kissing it. It is recommended that if you are visiting a shrine, you wear a mask and wash the hands soap right before and right after visiting.

According to the message passed on by some Mullahs, the only thing people need to do to stay safe is pray five times a day. As long as they wash their hands during the prayers, the virus will not be transmitted.

Answer: During times of crisis, faith remains a fundamental part of life and community practice. In addition to observing religious practices during health crises, it is important to follow health professionals' advice and infection prevention precautions to avoid further spreading the virus within our communities. Handwashing with soap, wearing a mask over your mouth and nose, and keeping a physical distance of at least 1.5 meters from other people are the number one steps recommended by health professionals to protect individuals and help prevent spreading the virus to others. Handwashing with soap during the five prayers will reduce the

chances of further transmission. Additional steps are also recommended such as avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth if your hands are not clean; practice physical distancing and stay at home if you feel unwell.

Many community members reportedly believe that the pandemic is either not real or a conspiracy because it does not affect real Muslims. Some say that COVID-19 is a test sent by God due to the evil deeds of non-Muslims, or a divine punishment targeted towards the hypocrites they therefore proceeding the mass religious gatherings. This view is supported by some mullahs, who encourage the communities to be charitable as a way to prevent the spread of the virus.

Answer: COVID-19 is transmitted person to person and is indiscriminate. No one of any race, culture or religion has immunity to this virus. When large groups have gathered for religious worship, weddings or funerals together, the virus has travelled between people and spread into communities. The community level transmission is one reason why it has spread so fast and so easily around the world. COVID-19 has now spread to over 184 countries and territories around the world, including Afghanistan and all its neighboring countries. To protect yourself, make sure you clean your hands frequently and thoroughly and avoid touching your eyes, mouth, and nose. Handwashing with soap, wearing a mask over your mouth and nose, and keeping a physical distance of at least 1.5 meters from other people are the number one steps recommended by health professionals to protect individuals and help prevent spreading the virus to others. Mosques may be encouraging charitable contributions to help vulnerable families care for themselves during this time. This important, as charity along with following the medical guidance is the best way to protect yourself and your community.

No burial will take place if one dies from COVID-19.

Answer: Special precautions should be taken when handling the body of an individual who dies after suffering from COVID-19 to avoid further transmission of the virus to others. However, they should always be treated in the same way as other people who die of other causes, in accordance with Islamic traditions.

People may die of COVID-19 in health care facilities, home or in other locations and the safety and well-being of everyone who takes care of the bodies should be the first priority. The dignity of the dead, their cultural and religious traditions, and their families should be respected and protected throughout. But large numbers of people gathering for funeral prayers should be avoided or done in a safe way, wearing a mask over your mouth and nose and maintaining a safe social distance of 1.5 meters, to prevent transmission between people who may have the virus without knowing. The hasty disposal of the body of a person who died from COVID-19, should be avoided under all circumstances.

An AOG video stated that Islam predicted the pandemic with hopes that it will pass.

Answer: COVID-19 is a new strain of coronavirus that has not been previously identified in humans. A lot of facts have not been detected about the virus and research are underway to find more facts about the virus

3. GENERAL CONSPIRACIES

There are many theories about COVID-19 due to its recent emergence, unknown characteristics and persistent transmission. Conspiracy theories also emerge to try to explain away the existence of the virus. The prevalence of conspiracy theories and superstitions about contracting the virus – including from health services and from dead bodies – reveals the level of distrust in the community and the effects of poor health literacy and a lack of understanding of basic public health facts, such as how infection and transmission takes place between people OR that a virus can exist and be spread, without being seen.

COVID-19 is a biological weapon.

Answer: All available evidence suggests that the virus causing COVID-19 has a natural animal origin and is not a manipulated or constructed virus. It most probably has its ecological reservoir in bats. More information about the origins of COVID-19 can be found by talking to health or medical professionals or calling the MoPH hotline on 166.

The entire thing is just a conspiracy. There is no such virus even existing at all or not at least in Afghanistan. We have no relatives/friends who have gotten the virus, so it means there is no such a virus.

Answer: The virus that causes COVID-19 has been sequenced over 28,000 times by laboratories around the world since its was discovered. It has also been found in manymillions of people through testing. If COVID-19 was not caused by this specific virus then none of these tests would have turned positive. The virus is not visible and can be very easily transmitted from person to person even without diagnosis. Even if you don't know someone with the virus, it is known to be affecting a large proportion of the population in Afghanistan and other parts of the world.

Large swathes of people think “it is like HIV”.

Answer: Both COVID-19 and HIV are viruses that can cause people to be very sick, and in some cases result in death. All viruses can be transmitted from one person to another, but they are very different, they affect the body very differently, and are transmitted in different ways, and should not be compared. Researchers around the world are working to find an effective treatment or vaccine for COVID-19. While some HIV drugs are being trialed as a potential treatment, there is currently no evidence that these medicines are effective against the virus.

Background information:

Viruses make people sick when they replicate and spread through the body, and most anti-viral drugs are

designed to stop that replication process. Giving someone the drug early, when there's only a small number of virus particles in the body, is going to be more effective than waiting until the virus is everywhere throughout the body. While most ongoing research studies are focused on finding treatments for people who are already sick with COVID-19, some researchers are looking to see if they can stop people who are at high risk from getting sick in the first place.

HIV inhibitors have also been used against the coronavirus that causes SARS. These included the HIV inhibitors lopinavir/ritonavir (Kaletra) in combination with an agent for Hepatitis C. However, effectiveness could not be further investigated because there were no new patients. Like HIV, coronaviruses use a so-called protease enzyme to multiply. Lopinavir/ritonavir inhibits this process in HIV, and it was thought that it would have the same effect on the coronavirus. However, it has now been demonstrated that these HIV inhibitors have no significant effect on the protection against or the cure of COVID-19.

Pre-Exposure Prophylactic (PrEP) has already been established as an effective medicine that revolutionized the fight against HIV. Since a vaccine for HIV has not yet been developed after decades of research, PrEP has been able to act as a preventative measure for those vulnerable to the disease. As a preventative measure, taken daily PrEP has been able to reduce vulnerable populations' chance of infection by over 99%.

4. STIGMA & FEAR

A COVID-19 diagnosis is associated with a lot of stigma. This can affect a person's decision to reveal symptoms, to have a test, accept diagnosis, self-quarantine, or to seek treatment for themselves or their family members. People also target those using preventative measures such as PPE with ridicule. Accusations include those made by some individuals that COVID diagnoses are being directed politically to stigmatize some individuals. The risk of stigma is concrete, and the following are some specific examples of stigma leading to risky behaviour. It is important to address stigmatising people for any reason, as it can result in behaviour that leads directly to the transmission of the virus.

Some patients with symptoms still do not want to go to the hospital for check-up to avoid being stigmatized as contaminated with the virus, which can lead to hatred against them. People are hiding if they think they have COVID-19 due to the fear of stigmatization and lack of respect for those who have survived it. People fear stigmatization, being hated and being socially shamed for having COVID-19 or even for having a test for the virus. Some people are believed to be "hiding" returnees from Iran or visitors from Herat in their homes, even if sick.

Answer: Becoming infected with the coronavirus is not a shameful thing and we are all vulnerable to contracting the virus, regardless of race, religion, age or gender. Every patient, person who dies and members of their families deserve respect and dignity at all times. Medical teams are responsible for providing services to all. Doctors should not discriminate while treating patients.

People fear, "If I die of this disease of corona then no one will come to my funeral." because sometimes if a community knows that someone died of COVID-19 they will not attend the funeral, so their relatives try to hide that fact. It was reported that a lot of people die due to COVID-19 but the cause of death is often listed as heart attacks or other issues as people don't want others to know they died of Covid.

Answer: Based on current evidence the COVID-19 virus is transmitted between people through droplets, fomites and close contact. To date there is no evidence of persons having become infected from exposure to the bodies of persons who died from COVID-19. All the funeral ceremonies can be held based on their culture and religious traditions, their family should be respected and protected thoroughly. People who are preparing the dead body should wear gloves, a gown, and a medical mask. Children, adults below 60 years, and immunosuppressed persons should not directly interact with the body, other family members and friends can view the body after it has been prepared for burial, but no one should kiss or touch the dead body, everyone should wash their hands and keep at least 1.5 meters physical distance from each other.

Other community members consider the pandemic as a joke and make fun of the preventive measures and PPE adopted by staff. These misconceptions have been occasionally affecting the effectiveness of awareness raising and preventive measures, as community members have not always been respecting the advised preventive measures (e.g. social distancing).

Answer: This novel corona virus is very easily transmitted between people. This is why it's important to practice social distancing and hygiene in order to prevent its spread. In addition, the use of masks and personal protective equipment (PPE) can help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and can be a responsible action to take in order to protect yourself, and the community around you. It is recommended that the general public should wear masks when there is widespread transmission of the virus such as there is in Afghanistan.

In some of the targeted villages, community members hosting the Mobile Health Teams' activities have started raising concerns of virus spread in their own houses because of INGO activities.

Answer: It is important that everyone, including health workers and members of the community, follow the recommended guidance to prevent the spread of the virus. Handwashing with soap, wearing a mask over your mouth and nose, and keeping a physical distance of at least 1.5 meters from other people are the number one steps recommended by health professionals. Conducting social affairs in the open air is safer than doing so indoors.

Mobile health teams should observe the protocols such as following an activity plan to identify risk of transmission, take measures to mitigate risk, arrange with community members or leaders prior to the visit to ensure that measures are in place, and that permission to visit a village has been cleared. If a community does not want to have a visitor, MHTs should look for other ways to deliver information to communities. It is

important that communities have access to health services. If you have a specific concern about an INGO worker, or fear they are presenting a threat, you can give feedback or make a complaint by calling Awaaz the toll-free confidential helpline, on 410. Anyone with access to a mobile phone in Afghanistan can call for free to access information on and register feedback about the humanitarian response.