

Understand the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) and prevent infection

- [COVID-19](#)
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No country is immune to the spread of the [Novel Coronavirus](#) - officially named [COVID-19](#) by the World Health Organization (WHO). The outbreak has been declared a global public health emergency. Here's all you need to know to stay healthy!

Looking back, the fast-spreading virus was first detected in Wuhan City, in the Hubei Province of China in December 2019. It has since spread to [multiple countries](#), with Egypt recording the first case on the African continent on Valentine's Day (the case tested negative for COVID-19 and underwent a 14-day observation period until 27 February 2020). Algeria's health ministry confirmed a COVID-19 case on 25 February 2020. And, Nigeria's health ministry [confirmed their first case](#) on 28 February 2020. Only a day earlier the South African Presidency announced that 132 South Africans, currently living under lockdown, would be evacuated from Wuhan City. Though none of them were diagnosed with or had symptoms of COVID-19, they would be placed in quarantine for 21 days on arrival in South Africa as a precautionary measure.

What makes COVID-19 so tricky to deal with?

"There is limited information available about its clinical features and the severity of disease it causes," says **Dr Noluthando Nematswerani**, Discovery Health's Head of the Centre for Clinical Excellence. "Recent data shows that [more than 80%](#) of people infected with COVID-19 have mild disease and recover. In about 5% of cases patients have critical disease and in 2% of cases the virus causes a fatal respiratory illness. The risk of death increases the older a person is. While, [scientists](#) scramble to develop a vaccine for COVID-19, international efforts are concentrated on early detection and quarantining of infected patients."

How well do you understand the Novel Coronavirus ?

COVID-19 **spreads very quickly** through:

- the air, after coughing or sneezing - people could catch COVID-19 if they are standing within one meter of a person who has the illness, by breathing in droplets coughed out or exhaled by the ill person
- close personal contact, such as when shaking hands or touching others
- touching an object or surface on which the virus is found (after an ill person coughs or exhales close to these objects or surfaces such as desks, tables or telephones), then - **before washing the hands** - touching the mouth, nose, or eyes
- rarely, fecal contamination

People who contract the Novel Coronavirus may take anywhere from **one to 14 days to develop symptoms**. There is no medication available to combat the virus during the asymptomatic phase. **Symptoms of 2019 Novel Coronavirus infection include:**

- Fever
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing

Doctors can only treat the symptoms of COVID-19 as they present. No specific therapy has been shown to be effective against the virus itself.

Novel Coronavirus and this year's Influenza virus - a double whammy threat?

“Every South African has a fundamental role to play in curbing the spread of Novel Coronavirus,” **says Dr Nematswerani**. “We also all have the power to protect ourselves and each other against infection. We must, as a nation, be focussed on one approach - prevention is better than cure.”

Why? “COVID-19 has spread at an unprecedented rate, and is potentially fatal. Another potentially fatal virus is headed to the Southern Hemisphere. We are a month away from the start of this year’s Influenza (flu) virus season, which will bring new viral strains to our country. So, South Africans could simultaneously be hit with a double viral shockwave this year,” explains Dr Nematswerani.

Why is your annual flu vaccine more important than ever before?

Between late December 2019 and the end of February 2020 there were almost 76000 total **confirmed cases** of COVID-19 infection across the world, with almost 300 deaths recorded as a result of the fatal respiratory disease that is COVID-19 in its most serious form. “These figures are worrying,” says Dr

Nematswerani. “Equally worrying is that every year, [up to 650 000](#) people die of respiratory disease caused by the flu virus.”

Let’s put that into perspective. “Most large airplanes carry around 550 passengers. That equates to all the people on 1181 flights dying of flu - each year. The Novel Coronavirus caused 2000 deaths and 76 000 infections within its first two months of outbreak. That’s equivalent to 139 flights filled with infected people.”

Many of these deaths could have been prevented. “Both are viral illnesses so prevention methods are similar and very simple and cost-effective to implement. For starters, it’s more important than ever that people have their 2020 flu vaccine at the start of the flu season, or as soon as possible thereafter.”

- *Find out all you need to know about the flu vaccine [here](#).*

Antibiotics cannot help us against viruses

“It’s critical that we all understand that [antibiotics](#) do not work against Novel Coronavirus or the flu (influenza virus),” adds Dr Nematswerani. “They only work on bacterial infections, so antibiotics should not be used as a means of prevention or treatment in the case of these these illnesses.”

Spreading a prevention message stops the spread of viruses

The following eight simple, powerful habits, provide protection against coronaviruses, flu viruses and many other pathogens that are common in South Africa and abroad.

1. **Wash your hands often**, especially after direct contact with people who are ill, or after being in environments where sick people are cared for, like hospitals. Remember to wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds - even if they are not visibly dirty.
 - **Read all about the right way to wash your hands [here](#).**
2. **Avoid close contact** with people who have acute respiratory tract infections
3. **Avoid touching** the eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands
4. Practice **cough etiquette** - when you cough, maintain your distance from others. Cover your mouth and nose with clothing, or with a flexed elbow or a tissue (discard it immediately) and wash your hands immediately afterwards
5. Avoid **spitting** in public
6. **Clean and disinfect** frequently-touched objects and surfaces
7. Avoid **eating raw or undercooked animal products**. Handle raw meat, milk or animal organs with care to avoid cross-contamination with other uncooked foods. Use different cutting boards and knives for raw meat and other foods. Wash your hands between handling raw food – especially meat – and any other food.
8. Do not eat the **meat that comes from animals** that have died of diseases

“If you feel ill and have any of the symptoms of infection with COVID-19 you must seek medical care early and share your previous travel history with your healthcare provider,” says Dr Nematswerani.

You will need to be tested for the Novel Coronavirus if you have:

- a severe acute respiratory illness, with fever or history of fever and cough with pneumonia
- or Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (based on clinical/X-ray findings) that requires you to be admitted to hospital
- and any of the following:
 - Have a documented travel history to Wuhan, Hubei Province China within 14 days before symptom onset; or
 - Have had close physical contact with a person confirmed to have COVID-19 while he/she is symptomatic
 - Are a healthcare worker who was exposed to patients with severe acute respiratory infections (in the absence of any other reason for your symptoms)

How should you stay healthy while travelling?

- Frequently **clean your hands with soap and water** or alcohol-based hand rub
- **Avoid touching** your eyes, nose or mouth with unclean hands while travelling, especially when using public transport
- If you choose to wear a **face mask** be sure to cover your mouth and nose and avoid touching the mask once it's on. The WHO [explains when and how](#) to use medical masks
- Immediately **discard single-used masks** after each use and wash your hands after removing the mask
- **Avoid close contact** with people suffering from fever and cough
- Eat only **well-cooked food**
- Avoid contact with **sick animals**
- It's important to **avoid travel** if you have a **fever and cough**. If you become sick while travelling on an airplane or using public transport, inform the personnel and seek medical care early. When you seek medical attention remember to share your travel history with your healthcare provider
- Avoid **markets where live animals are sold**. If you do visit animal markets in areas currently experiencing cases of Novel Coronavirus, avoid direct unprotected contact with live animals and surfaces in contact with animals. Avoid contact with stray animals, waste and fluids in roads and markets.

Dr Nematswerani adds, “Vaccines usually take years to develop. While there is a chance that medical and technological innovations could cut that time down when it comes to a vaccine against COVID-19, that will not help to fight the current outbreak. A vaccine will be essential if the virus becomes established.”

Prevent the spread of social stigma around COVID-19

For most people COVID-19 is a disease that can be overcome! What is important is that we [talk positively](#) and emphasise the effectiveness of prevention and treatment measures. We must encourage the sharing of truth and facts and prevent the spread of misinformation that stigmatises people who acquire COVID-19. A stigma around this illness will have negative impact as it can:

- Cause people to hide their illness to avoid discrimination
- Prevent people from seeking healthcare immediately if symptoms arise
- Discourage people from adopting healthy behaviours that prevent the spread of COVID-19

Read the [WHO and UNICEF's document](#) on Social Stigma associated with COVID-19.

For more information on coronaviruses:

- *Read the WHO's Q&A on coronaviruses*
- *Read the NICD's Q&A on coronaviruses*

For more information and support:

- Contact Discovery Health on 0860 99 88 77 for more information.
- Visit the [NICD website](#).

REFERENCES

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