













DE-MYSTIFYING COVID-19

Responding to young people's questions and fears.

With so many myths and misconceptions around Covid-19 also known as Coronavirus, young people do not have correct and adequate information about this virus and they continue to be misinformed. It is under this background that the Youth Empowerment and Transformation Trust (YETT) decided to engage Doctor Norman Matara to demystify some of these myths for young people by answering some common questions that they had on the medical aspects of Covid-19. The virtual dialogue, was held on the 2nd of April 2020. Doctor Norman Matara is a medical Doctor specialising in public health and he is also the Secretary General of Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights. Below are his responses to some of the raised questions.

Q: What is the difference between a fever, flu and a common cold?

A: Though symptoms are similar notifiable, the difference include presents of a high fever, dry cough, shortness of breath and absence of runny nose and stuffy nose in COVID-19. See the image below for a comparison of the three.

SYMPTOM CHART: WHAT TO WATCH FOR			
Symptoms	Coronavirus <small>Symptoms range from mild to severe</small>	Cold <small>Gradual onset of symptoms</small>	Flu <small>Rapid onset of symptoms</small>
 Fever	Common	Rare	Common
 Fatigue	Sometimes	Sometimes	Common
 Cough	Common* (usually dry)	Mild	Common* (usually dry)
 Sneezing	No	Common	No
 Aches and pains	Sometimes	Common	Common
 Runny or stuffy nose	Rare	Common	Sometimes
 Sore throat	Sometimes	Common	Sometimes
 Diarrhea	Rare	No	Sometimes for children
 Headaches	Sometimes	Rare	Common
 Shortness of breath	Sometimes	No	No

Sources: World Health Organization, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Q: How do we explain to our younger sisters and brothers what COVID-19 is in simpler terms?

A: Covid-19 is a new disease caused by a new virus. This virus spreads from human to another and it affects the respiratory system, the system responsible for breathing.

Q: How does COVID-19 spreads from one person to another?

A: COVID-19 spreads by droplet infections when an infected person coughs and sneezes. These droplets can spread directly if you are less than 2m from an infected, person or they can land on surfaces and when you touch the surface and then your face, that is when one gets infected.

Q: Where else can one get tested for COVID -19 besides Wilkins? Do we have testing centres across the country? what is the procedure for accessing these?

A: Currently tests are being conducted in Harare only. Other provinces have sample collection centres and samples are then sent to Harare for tests. The ministry has promised to decentralize the testing to all provinces.

Q: What is the incubation period for COVID-19?

A: The incubation period is the time between infection and appearance of symptoms is between one and 14 days. The average for appearance of symptoms is 5 days.

Q: There has been a discussion about asymptomatic patients. Where does this take us since our government is currently testing symptomatic people?

A: The Ministry of Health and Child Care (MOHCC) is currently testing people who meet the World Health Organisation (WHO) case definition of a suspected case. These need to have symptoms. However, we have been advocating for the government to widen their spectrum for suspected cases to include asymptomatic cases. The majority of cases especially fit young adults may be asymptomatic and there are fears that these are escaping the testing net and giving the nation a false security of low covid19 cases.

Q:How is contact tracing for COVID-19 being done? How effective is it as a mitigation measure?

A: Contact tracing is being done with the assistance of the COVID-19 positive patient who try and recall people he/she would have been in contact with. For case 2 in Zimbabwe, the government also published different places that the patient had visited. However, we think contact tracing is not being done as vigorously as we would want. It is a very important activity in breaking chain of infection.

Q: What is the use of Ventilators and other breathing materials on COVID-19 positive patients?

A: Ventilators are used for mechanical ventilation that is assisting the positive patient to breathe when his/her lungs are failing. 2.5% of cases worldwide needs assisted ventilation.

Q: I can you elaborate on the extent at which surgical masks being worn assist in prevention of entry of the Virus also can a single mask be worn more than twice.

A: We do not encourage surgical masks to be worn twice. You can do so with N95 masks. Surgical masks offer a bit of protection and are better than no mask at all when you have symptoms or caring for someone with COVID-19 symptoms.

Q: What have we learnt about our Health System as a country and what are we going to do about it?

A: Our Health system has been exposed on how weak and underfunded it is and this is something that as health professionals have been crying about for the past few years and we were being ignored. We have consistently failed to honour the Abuja declaration that we signed in 2002 as a country which says 15% of the national budget should be channelled to healthcare. We hope after this our government will invest in health care and make sure our hospitals in all provinces are equipped with basic and essential medicines as well as equipment.

Q: According to WHO, Covid-19 is everywhere. What is the long-term solution to fighting this virus given the lockdowns are a temporary measure for an indefinite case?

A: The long term and solution to the crisis is if we get a vaccine. Epidemiologists believe COVID-19 is something which is not going to go away soon, but sooner or later it is going to go. Hence the need for a vaccine. Currently there is no approved vaccine. Scientists are working on finding one and several countries have started clinical trials on vaccines. Lockdown is necessary so that we have what we call flattening the curve. This means we want to minimise new infections as much as possible so that our health system is not overwhelmed. Lockdown also allows us to test as many people as possible and to do contact tracing and cut the chain of infection. However even after lock-down, we still need to continue with the safety measures that have been preached by health professionals.

Q: Lock down is meant to buttress the social distancing aspect but is that aspect (social distancing) a privilege that third world countries can afford?

A: This is a challenge; I do agree we have a challenge in social distancing considering our economic and social set up. But for us to combat this virus we really need to try as much as possible to practice social distancing. It is one of the most proven and effective methods.

Q: According to a WHO report, I understand that masks are to be worn by infected people or those caring for an infected person. Can a person who is not affected benefit anything by wearing a mask?

A: There is no consensus on the benefit of wearing a mask by unaffected individuals. Correction, WHO and our ministry of health do not recommend wearing of masks by unaffected individuals

The reasons behind is most masks do not fit perfectly, So people end up touching their masks trying to adjust the mask. This becomes a source of infection and also people who wear masks develop a false sense of security and forego other more important preventive measures like washing hands.

If you get a perfectly fitting mask, and you continue practising, good hygiene there is no harm in having one.

Q: Can a person become a carrier without showing any signs of infection?

A: There is no evidence that a person can be a carrier for life. However, for the first 21 days post infection a person can be asymptomatic and still spread infection.

Q: What are effects of virus on the foetus of a pregnant woman?

A: Currently there is no conclusive data on how COVID-19 affects unborn babies. Infants who have been born to COVID-19 positive patients have all tested negative to date. However the cases remain few at the moment and cannot be used as conclusive evidence. We will have a full picture as we encounter many such cases. There have been NO cases or data that link covid19 to negative pregnancy outcomes such as miscarriages, stillbirths, prematurity and low birth weight at the moment. Pregnant women should however continue to practice the same preventive measures like non-pregnant women.

Q: Can breastfeeding mothers pass on corona virus to their babies through breastfeeding?

A: Currently there is no evidence for this. Coronavirus has not been found in breastmilk. Women who test positive should continue breastfeeding.

Q: What foods can one eat to boost my immune system against the virus?

A: There is no specific food that protects one from getting the virus. However, you need to keep your immune system in good shape such that if you get infected you have low chance of getting the severe form. Foods rich in vitamins reduce alcohol intake, regular exercise.

Q: How safe are we from the vaccines as Africans considering we have very few cases here?

A: We might be having few cases for now, but there is no doubt that the numbers will increase in the next few months. We are not immune to this virus as some have suggested. We will definitely need the vaccine.

Q: How true is the issue of covid-19 not being much of a problem to regions with high temperature ?

A: That is an unproven myth.

Q: It is being said Covid-19 came from China and it originated from animals, specifically bats. How true is this? And also does that mean we have to get rid of our domestic animals as well because of this to be safe?

A: The true origin of the virus is not 100% known. It is indeed believed that it came from wild animals. The Centre for disease control and prevention as well as WHO has published that domestic pets do not spread the virus, so there is no need to get rid of your pets.

Q: Does taking lemon, garlic and ginger alkaline help as we have been advised before?

A: That is another myth. The pH of blood is tightly regulated tightly. Even if u eat alkaline foods the pH of blood will not change as that will actually make u sick if its changes. It is a myth and should not be considered. Alkaline diets however may offer some small gastric benefits but have no covid-19 benefit.

Q: We have heard so many different hours of how long the Covid-19 virus can survive on surfaces. May we know the correct length?

A: Cardboard, paper, fabrics up to 24hrs

Plastic, counter tops 24-48 hrs

Stainless steel, glass 24-72 hrs.

Q: Why is it in some reported cases a person who may have recovered from the virus are testing positive again? Does it mean those who are healing are not completely "cured" of the disease?

A: With infections, we expect that once you recover you develop permanent immunity against that virus. Correction, there have been few cases that tested positive after recovery. This is an anomaly and scientists do not have full explanation as to why that has happened yet. However, the cases that were positive after recovery have been very few.

YETT envisages a just, inclusive and prosperous society where young people fully participate and lead in sustainable development.

For More Information

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