



INFORMATION NOTE: COVID 19 AND HIV

Please note: this technical note has been developed by Frontline AIDS to provide people living with HIV, their caregivers and organisations supporting them with basic guidance on how to prepare and hopefully mitigate the impact that the current outbreak of coronavirus disease COVID-19 may have on their lives. The epidemic is rapidly evolving, and additional and more updated information might become available soon. For this reason, readers are strongly encouraged to check for any updates on this topic on the following sites:

World Health Organisation:

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

UNAIDS

https://www.unaids.org/en/20200317_covid19_hiv

What is the new coronavirus disease COVID-19?

Coronavirus disease COVID 19 is an illness caused by a virus belonging to a large family of viruses, altogether called coronaviruses.

The virus causing coronavirus disease COVID-19 can affect both animals and humans. In humans it can cause respiratory infections, from the common cold to more severe conditions, like pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome and sometimes death.

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, tiredness, and dry cough. Some people may have aches and pains, runny nose, sore throat or diarrhea. These symptoms are usually mild and begin gradually.

Some people become infected but don't develop any symptoms and don't feel unwell. Most people (about 80%) recover from the disease without needing special treatment.

Around 1 out of every 6 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.

People with fever, cough and difficulty breathing should seek medical attention.

How does the virus 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 1 meter (3 feet) away from a person who is sick.

Are people living with HIV at higher risk of infection?

Right now, there is no strong evidence that people living with HIV are at an especially increased risk of contracting Covid-19.

However, as in the general population, older people living with HIV, people living with HIV with heart or lung problems and people living with HIV with a compromised immune system may be at a higher risk of getting the virus.

Are people living with HIV and infected with COVID-19 at higher risk of becoming seriously ill?

There is no strong evidence that people living with HIV who contract the coronavirus disease COVID-19 are at a higher risk of becoming seriously ill than the rest of the population who may become sick with COVID-19.

However, amongst people living with HIV, the risk is likely to be greatest for those with low CD4 cell counts and those who are not on antiretroviral therapy with full viral suppression.

I am living with HIV. How do I protect myself and those around me from getting sick?

Basic protective measures for people living with HIV against the new coronavirus disease COVID 19 are not different from the ones for the general population. Everyone should follow them.

Wash your hands frequently

Regularly and thoroughly clean your hands with soap and water, or an alcohol-based hand rub if you have it.

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

Maintain social distancing

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 liquid droplets from their nose or mouth which may contain 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.

Practice respiratory hygiene

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 virus. By following good respiratory hygiene you protect the people around you from viruses such as cold, flu and COVID-19.

If you have fever, cough and difficulty breathing, seek medical care early

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 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.

I am living with HIV. What can I do to prepare for a coronavirus disease COVID-19 epidemic in my country?

Here are 5 actions you can take to prepare for a possible coronavirus disease COVID-19 epidemic in your country:

1. Ensure ample supply of HIV Antiretroviral Treatment. It is recommendable to have at least a 30 days' supply of antiretroviral treatment available at all times
2. If you suffer from any other illness, like hypertension, lung or heart disease, asthma, diabetes, tuberculosis, malaria, or if you have any other underlying health condition, make sure to have all the medications you need to stay healthy in good supply. Now is the time to make sure your underlying conditions are as controlled as possible and that you are as healthy as you can be.
3. If you can, keep vaccinations up to date, especially vaccinations against respiratory illnesses like influenza and bacterial pneumonia
4. Establish a plan for clinical care should you need it, especially if you are asked to self-isolate or if you are quarantined. Depending on where you live you might consider seeking medical care via the phone, or using telemedicine options (for instance through physician on-line portals, or live video telemedicine)
5. Maintain a good social network but remotely. Reach out to your friends and family and share your contacts. Being connected to people around you is one of the most important things you can do to prepare for, respond to, and recover from an emergency. Social contact also helps us stay mentally healthy and fights boredom.

I am living with HIV. What can I do to maintain good mental health during a coronavirus COVID-19 epidemic in my country?

It is normal to feel sad, distressed, worried, confused, scared or angry during a crisis. If you are living with HIV you may experience increased levels of stress or anxiety. If this happens talk to people you trust, contact your friends and family. If you feel overwhelmed, consider talking to a health worker, a social worker or another trusted person in your community (e.g., religious leader or community elder). To maintain good mental health during an epidemic also consider the following tips:

1. Exercise daily (e.g. yoga, tai chi, stretching) and try to maintain a healthy lifestyle (including a proper diet, sleep, exercise and social contact with loved ones at home, even virtually), especially if you must stay at home.
2. Reduce the time spent looking for information (1-2 times a day, rather than every hour).
3. Reduce the time spent listening at upsetting media coverage and looking at fearful images on TV.
4. Draw on skills that you have used in the past during difficult times to manage your emotions during this outbreak.

Resources: WHO current guidance on COVID-19 , Dr. John Brooks CROI 2020 special session on COVID-19, IASC Briefing Note on addressing mental health and psychosocial aspects of COVID-19 Outbreak)