



MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND MEDICAL SERVICES

Date: 19/02/2020

Frequently Asked Questions: 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Medical Information

Q: What is 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19)?

A: Coronaviruses are a large group of viruses, with six of these viruses known to cause a range of illnesses from the common cold to the more serious Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). The COVID-19 was discovered in late December 2019 after an unusual cluster of pneumonia cases was noted in Wuhan City, Hubei province, China.

Q: How does the virus spread?

A: Detailed investigations are ongoing to determine what is the animal source of the virus, however the virus is spread from person to person through respiratory droplets, usually when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. A person may also get infected if they touch a surface or object (like a door handle or table) that has the virus on it and then touch their mouth or face. Generally, the virus is only spread when a person is in close contact with a sick person, for example living in the same household or workplace.

Q. How long does it take for a person to get sick, after they are infected with the virus (the incubation period)?

A. The incubation period is the time between infection and the onset of clinical symptoms of disease. The incubation period for COVID-19 is currently estimated at between two to 14 days. While people are mostly infectious when they experience (flu-like) symptoms, it may be possible that people can transmit the virus without having any symptoms or before the symptoms appear. However, investigations are ongoing to determine this.

If people infected with COVID-19 are tested and diagnosed quickly and there is a rapid public health response undertaken to reduce the spread of the virus, the chance of further, continued spread of the virus in a community is likely to be low.

Q: What are the symptoms?

A: Symptoms of COVID-19 are respiratory symptoms that are similar to other respiratory diseases like influenza. Having the symptoms does not necessarily mean you have COVID-19. These symptoms include fever, cough, difficulty or shortness of breath, and other flu-like symptoms.

Q. How serious is COVID-19?

Like other respiratory illnesses, infection with COVID-19 can cause mild symptoms including a runny nose, sore throat, cough, and fever. For some people it can be more severe and can lead to pneumonia or breathing difficulties. More rarely, the disease can be fatal. Older people, and people with pre-existing medical conditions (such as, diabetes and heart disease) appear to be more vulnerable to becoming severely ill with the virus.

Q: Should I be tested for COVID-19?

A: If you develop flu-like symptoms, such as fever, cough and shortness of breath, within 14 days after travel from China or another area affected by COVID-19, you should call the Ministry of Health and tell us about your recent travel, or contact with someone who has recently travelled. They will be able to inform you on next steps and also whether laboratory tests need to be undertaken. If you suspect COVID-19, it is important that you self-isolate at home or your hotel room and avoid public spaces or crowds.

Q: How do you test a person for COVID-19?

A: At this time, diagnostic testing for COVID-19 can be conducted only at the WHO Reference laboratory in Melbourne, Australia. The Fijian MHMS collects and sends specimens only for strongly suspected cases and not routinely for screening.

Q. Is there a treatment for the disease caused by COVID-19?

A: To date, there is no specific medicine recommended to prevent or treat the COVID-19. However, those infected with COVID-19 should receive appropriate care to relieve and treat symptoms, and those with severe illness should receive optimized supportive

care. Supportive care (e.g. supportive therapy and monitoring – oxygen therapy, fluid management and antivirals) can be highly effective for those infected.

Prevention

Q: What can you do?

A: Fijians are strongly advised against any travel to China. This advice may be reviewed as the situation develops.

If you must travel to China, please:

- Avoid visiting markets that sell live and dead animals out in the open
- Avoid unprotected contact with live wild or farm animals
- Avoid contact with persons with flu like symptoms
- Ensure that you only eat meat or eggs that are thoroughly cooked
- Practice hand and respiratory hygiene (described below).

Q: How can I help protect myself?

A: The Ministry recommends that people practice the following simple hygiene measures, which will also prevent other diseases:

- Cover your mouth and nose with tissue, sleeve, or elbow when coughing or sneezing. Throw tissue into a close bin after use. Clean hands after coughing and sneezing and when caring for the sick
- Frequently clean your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub
- Avoid contact with persons with flu like symptoms

Q: Does current evidence recommend the use of facemask in Fiji to prevent COVID-19?

A: No. Currently the use of face masks is not recommended for healthy persons, and in Fiji where there is no confirmed cases of COVID-19, the Ministry of Health does not recommend the use of face masks. WHO recommends that members of the public only use face masks if they are caring for sick individuals who have COVID-19, or if they have flu-like symptoms.

Limiting the unnecessary use of face masks is important as currently there is a global shortage of face masks, which are critical for use by health care workers.

Q. Is there a vaccine against COVID-19?

A: No. There are currently no vaccines against coronaviruses, including COVID-19. That is why it is very important to prevent infection or contain further spread after an infection with the COVID-19.

Q. Am I protected against COVID-19 if I had the influenza vaccine this year?

Influenza and COVID-19 are two different viruses and the seasonal influenza vaccine would not protect against infection caused by COVID-19.

Q: What is the risk of international spread?

A: The outbreak started in Wuhan in Hubei province in mainland China, with cases now being reported from almost every major city in China.

As of 19 February, there are over 74,000 confirmed cases and over 1,900 deaths being reported in mainland China and over 1,000 cases reported outside of China. However, the outbreak is evolving very rapidly, and there is always the potential for the virus being imported to Fiji.

Public Health Response and Current Situation

Q: What is the status of COVID-19 cases and spread in Fiji?

A: As of 19 February there are no confirmed cases in Fiji. Suspected cases are identified and quickly isolated within one of the isolation facilities in the Division where they are located, until laboratory tests are completed. It is important that the general public follow updates and advisories issued from official government authorities regarding any developments relating to COVID-19.

Q: What is the Ministry of Health and Medical Services doing?

A: The Fijian Ministry of Health and Medical Services is following advice from the World Health Organization and working across agencies to manage the risks of COVID-19 and preparing for the prevention of spread of this newly identified virus, should it come to Fiji.

Our response is multilayered with focus on preventing spread in Fiji through:

- Early identification of cases at the international borders and in the community
- Targeted awareness and monitoring of high-risk persons (e.g. those who have travelled to an outbreak area)

- Awareness for the general public to reduce their risk
- Readiness of our health staff and facilities to respond to any cases.

International border control is one part of our response, and we are working with the relevant stakeholders, including airport authorities and airlines, to enhance existing mechanisms for detecting ill travellers at the international point of entry.

There are no direct flights from Wuhan to Fiji. However, we do have flights from Hong Kong and Singapore that may serve as connections from passengers from Wuhan. Therefore, we are introducing additional health screening measures for passengers disembarking from flights that originate in Hong Kong and Singapore. These measures may be adapted as the situation changes.

Border health screening may not absolutely prevent cases from entering Fiji because a person who has been exposed to the virus may be completely well for up to 14 days before they have any symptoms of the disease. Therefore, we have also alerted our healthcare workers and emphasized that they must ask about history of travel for anyone that presents with symptoms. Early detection of cases and rapid response will help prevent spread in Fiji.

As part of the Ministry of Health's preparedness to respond to potential imported cases of COVID-19, isolation and quarantine facilities are being identified. Isolation and quarantine are standard public health measures taken to protect the public by stopping or limiting the spread of a contagious disease, like COVID-19.

Q: What is the difference between isolation and quarantine?

A:

- **Isolation** separates sick people with the disease from people who are not sick.
- **Quarantine** separates people who are well but may have been exposed to the virus to see if they become sick.

Q: What is the purpose of an isolation centre?

A: An isolation centre is used to separate sick individuals from other, uninfected people. At the isolation centre, generally a dedicated ward at a hospital, the patient will be isolated from other patients, and will be provided appropriate medical care. Health care workers will be provided appropriate protective equipment to help protect them from the virus, whilst providing care to the patient.

Q: What is the purpose of a quarantine facility?

A: Individuals who are well, may be quarantined if there is the risk they are may have been exposed to the virus and become sick. For example, if a person travelled on the same plane as a sick person. Quarantining is a precautionary measure that helps reduce the risk of a contagious disease spreading. If a person is quarantined, they will be restricted from leaving the facility and monitored closely for 14 days to see if they become sick. If after 14 days they don't become sick, then they will be cleared and allowed to re-enter the community.

Q: What happens if a person becomes sick in the quarantine facility?

A: Quarantine facilities will only host people who are being monitored but are not sick. If a person becomes sick, they will be quickly isolated to reduce the spread to other well individuals in the facility. These individuals will then be closely monitored to see if they develop symptoms.

Q: What is the risk to communities living nearby quarantine facilities?

A: Because the quarantine facility only hosts people who are being monitored, not who are sick, and these individuals are restricted from moving outside the facility, there is no evidence to suggest that surrounding communities could be exposed to the virus. The virus is only spread when a person is in close contact with a sick person, for example living in the same household or workplace.

Q: Am I at risk for COVID-19 infection in Fiji?

A: No. You are not at risk unless you have travelled outside of Fiji most recently, especially to mainland China. Furthermore, you need to inform health staff if you have had close contact with a suspected or confirmed case.

This is a rapidly evolving situation and the risk assessment may change daily. The latest updates are available on the Fijian MHMS or WHO's websites.

Q: Has anyone in Fiji been infected with COVID-19?

A: No. No suspected case has tested positive for COVID-19. All samples from the few suspected cases tested so far in Melbourne have returned negative.

Travel

Q: What should I do if I become unwell with symptoms when returning to Fiji from travel in areas known to have confirmed cases of COVID-19?

A: If travellers returning to Fiji become unwell, they should immediately inform the Ministry of Health through public health officers monitoring the reporting hotlines. The public health officer will be able to inform you of next steps and what to do. It is important that you notify health facilities ahead of time of your arrival, as this will help them limit the spread of the virus.

Reporting Hotlines to contact:

Central Division: 2219905

Eastern Division: 2219906

Western Division: 2219907

Northern Division: 2219908

Q: Is it safe to travel to China or other countries where COVID-19 cases have occurred?

A: The situation is quickly evolving and since the start of the outbreak, cases of COVID-19 have now been reported from almost all major cities in China. Because of this, all Fijians are strongly advised against travelling to mainland China.

Members of the public, especially individuals who are planning to travel abroad, are recommended to check the Fijian MHMS and WHO website for latest updates on the situation in Fiji and globally, and also check the health authority websites of countries you are planning travel to.

Q: What if I recently travelled to China and got sick?

A: If you were in China or any another country affected by COVID-19, and within 14 days of your return to Fiji, feel sick with fever, cough, or difficulty breathing, you should:

- Seek medical advice – call ahead before you go to a doctor’s office or emergency room. Tell them about your recent travel and your symptoms.
- Avoid contact with others.
- Not travel while sick.

- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve (not your hands) when coughing or sneezing.
- Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds to avoid spreading the virus to others.
- Wash your hands with soap and water immediately after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose. If soap and water are not readily available, you can use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Always wash hands with soap and water if hands are visibly dirty.

The Ministry of Health and Medical Services will continue to monitor the developing situation and adapt our advice accordingly.

Sources of Reliable Information

For more information and updates on the COVID-19, please visit these websites:

Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MHMS) website: <http://www.health.gov.fj/>

World Health Organisation's website: <https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus>
