

6 March 2020

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19/SARS-CoV-2)

Over the past few weeks, the outbreak of the novel coronavirus or the new coronavirus has become a growing concern for countries around the globe.

1. What has the University of the Free State (UFS) done so far to be prepared for a possible outbreak?

The Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Prof Francis Petersen has initiated the following steps:

- A Coronavirus Task Team has already been established, consisting of representatives from various departments on the campus, including the executive management, virologists, infectious disease experts, Student and International Affairs, Communication and Marketing, and Human Resources.
- The Task Team will liaise and work with the provincial Department of Health and the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) to provide up-to-date information to staff and students – including our preparedness for handling an outbreak in our community.

2. What is COVID-19?

The virus that is causing the current outbreak is called the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and the disease is referred to as coronavirus disease or COVID-19.

Human coronaviruses are common worldwide. Some coronaviruses are common causes of illness, including respiratory illness, in humans throughout the world.

Sometimes coronaviruses infecting animals can evolve to cause disease in humans (in other words they have crossed the species barrier) and become a new (novel) coronavirus for humans, such as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (or SARS) first recognised in China in 2002, as well as the current outbreak.

3. How serious is the novel coronavirus?

The virus was only discovered at the beginning of this year, so obviously the situation is evolving and there is still a lot that is not known.

The virus is spread by respiratory droplets and has travelled from China to multiple countries around the world.

4. What measures are in place at ports of entry in our country?

Fever screening is conducted at international airports. If there is a suspected case, procedures are in place for case isolation and testing so that the diagnosis can be made quickly.

Suspected cases will be managed at designated hospitals with isolation facilities.

5. What should a person do if they suspect they have COVID-19?

People who develop symptoms of respiratory illness, including cough, fever, and shortness of breath within 14 days of travelling to countries where coronavirus is known to be circulating, should seek medical care early and share information about their travel history with their doctors.

6. What are the signs and symptoms of COVID-19 infection in humans?

Current symptoms include mild to severe respiratory illness, with fever, cough, and difficulty breathing.

Reported illnesses have ranged from infected people with little to no symptoms to people being severely ill and dying.

Patients with underlying illness and the elderly (older than 60 years) appear to be at increased risk of severe illness.

7. There are concerns regarding the repatriation of a group of South Africans from China and possible quarantining of the persons in the Free State; how safe are we?

The government has committed to repatriation of South African citizens from China.

The entire repatriation process has been carefully planned together with the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), the Department of Health, and the Department of Defence.

The process will be guided by the World Health Organisation's guidelines and the relevant South African laws and policy framework.

This will be a very controlled process.

All citizens who are repatriated will be quarantined for 21 days. They will be screened for signs of illness before arriving.

To clarify the difference between quarantine and isolation:

Quarantine involves restricting the movement of persons with no signs of illness but who may have been exposed.

Isolation is used to separate people who do have the illness.

Hence, the people from China will be quarantined and monitored very closely. Any person identified as showing symptoms will be isolated in a designated hospital.

8. If the group is quarantined in the Free State, what risk is there to the general public?

There is essentially no risk to the general public. If one/more of the quarantined individuals become ill, they will be attended to on site by infectious disease doctors and, if necessary, they will be transferred to a designated hospital with isolation facilities.

9. Is there a designated hospital for persons with confirmed infections?

Pelonomi Hospital in Bloemfontein has been identified for isolation of persons with confirmed infections.

The hospital has an isolation ward where they have previously handled cases of Congo fever (a viral haemorrhagic fever with a 25% fatality rate) and has the required expertise for managing cases of COVID-19.

Patients will be treated in a specific isolation ward by suitably trained and experienced healthcare workers, and hence other patients and staff are not at risk of exposure.

10. Who should staff, students or their parents contact?

Regular communication regarding the virus is being distributed on the university's platforms, such as the Intranet and Blackboard.

Compiled by:

UFS Coronavirus (COVID-19/SARS-COV-2) Task Team
6 March 2020

Compiled from the following sources:

<http://www.nicd.ac.za/diseases-a-z-index/covid-19/frequently-asked-questions/>

[https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-2019\)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it)