

## Information for patients

### What is COVID-19?

Coronaviruses are viruses which cause cold and flu symptoms, and some coronaviruses have been circulating worldwide for many years. A new coronavirus was identified in China at the end of 2019, and has since spread to all continents. The disease caused by this new coronavirus was named COVID-19 by the World Health Organization.

### Who is at risk?

Everyone who has been in close contact with a person with the new coronavirus is at risk of contracting the disease. Travellers returning from affected international locations where community spread is occurring are at high risk.

### How does the virus spread?

Coronaviruses spread predominantly by respiratory droplets which are breathed or coughed out, usually within a distance of 2 meters, but may also spread via contaminated hands and surfaces. It may take up to two weeks to develop symptoms, and the virus can be transmitted even before symptoms appear.

### What are the symptoms?

You may not have symptoms when infected. Of symptomatic cases, the majority have mild cold and flu-type symptoms. Symptoms may be fever (usually over 38 degrees Celsius), shivers, muscle aches, coughing, sneezing, or breathing difficulty in more serious cases, and may last for up to two weeks. Severe disease is usually seen in elderly patients, and those with co-existing chronic medical conditions.

### Is the virus in South Africa?

There have been cases in South Africa, predominantly in returning travellers. There are currently 2 patients suspected of having contracted the infection locally but confirmation of this is still expected.

### How do I protect myself?

Avoid close contact with people who are coughing/sick. Cover your mouth or nose when cough or sneeze. If tissues are used, discard them immediately safely in a bin. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands. Wash your hands often with soap and water, and for at least 20 seconds. Alcohol-containing hand sanitisers can also be used and should contain a minimum of 60% alcohol. It is also advisable to go for an influenza vaccine – this will not protect against coronaviruses, but will help to keep you healthy through the winter season.

### Other prevention measures

Masks are useful to limit the spread of infection from people with symptoms, but are not proven to work for the protection of uninfected people such as travellers. Contact with people should be limited if you are infected or have a high suspicion of having the virus, and should last for 14 days.

### What do I do if I develop symptoms?

Please contact your medical practitioner if you think you might have COVID-19. It is advisable to contact your doctor's practice in advance to ensure that your doctor can prepare for your arrival, as it may be necessary to avoid an open waiting room to minimise the spread of the virus to other vulnerable patients. You can also contact the National Institute for Communicable Diseases at 0800 029 999 Monday through Friday from 08h00 to 16h00 if you need more information, or 021 928 4102 if you reside in the Western Cape.

### How is COVID-19 tested for?

A healthcare practitioner will take a sample from you if it is suspected that you have the disease. Samples may be swabs taken from the back of the nose and throat, or a sputum-like sample in the case of more severe disease. Blood tests may be used in future.

### Is there treatment available?

There is no specific antiviral treatment available yet for coronaviruses, and antibiotics cannot treat the disease either. Supportive treatment such as good hydration, fever medication, adequate nutrition and symptomatic treatment of other symptoms are advised, as done for other colds. In more severe cases requiring admission, your healthcare practitioner will advise appropriate therapy.