Dr Ben is Head of Health and Care with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). With this weekly fact sheet he will address some of the most common questions and rumours being asked by communities across Africa about the coronavirus, known as COVID-19. These questions and rumours are collected from communities by Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies working across Africa. This fact sheet aims to help National Societies respond to common questions and provide the facts behind the rumours and misinformation about the coronavirus.

1. Does drinking alcohol prevent coronavirus?

- **Drinking alcohol will not prevent or cure coronavirus.**
- In fact, drinking too much alcohol can actually make you sick and increase your chances of catching coronavirus by weakening the body's immune system (the defence system which normally protects you from becoming sick).
- Some people have tried making their own alcohol at home so that they can drink it to prevent coronavirus. This is very dangerous, and you should not do it. In Iran, 44 people died in March from drinking homemade alcohol as a means to prevent coronavirus.
- We think this rumour might have started because people are confusing advice about using alcohol-based hand sanitizers with drinking alcohol. Hand sanitizers and disinfectants are safe when they are used properly. They contain a very high level of alcohol (more than 60%) and are used to clean the hands and disinfect surfaces because they kill the virus. However, drinking alcohol as strong as hand sanitizer or disinfectant can make you very sick and even kill you.
- The best way to prevent coronavirus and keep yourself and your family safe is to follow the five simple rules below.

THE 5 SIMPLE RULES TO KEEP YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILY SAFE

1. Always wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer. Proper hand washing should take around 20 seconds and cover all parts of your hands – fingers, thumbs, between fingers, under nails, palms and the back of your hands. Sing the happy birthday song twice while you wash your hands to time 20 seconds. This will kill any viruses that are on your hands and stop them getting into your body.
2. Don't touch your eyes, nose and mouth – this increases the chance of passing the virus from your hands into your body.
3. The virus spreads from person to person so try to limit your contact with other people. Stay home and avoid bars, restaurants and public events. If you do go out, try to keep a safe distance from others. Imagine you are holding a big broom - you are a safe distance if you can't touch anyone with it. Avoid shaking hands, holding hands, kisses on the cheeks or hugs.
4. If you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your bent elbow – and wash your hands if you do cough or sneeze into your hands.
5. Stay at home if you feel unwell and have a dry cough and fever and contact your local health services or Ministry of Health hotline. This reduces the chance you might spread the virus to others.

2. Should I wear a mask to protect myself?

- **Only the following people need to wear a mask:**
  - Health care workers
  - People who have coronavirus symptoms – coughing, sneezing, fever. This will protect people around you from getting sick too.
  - People who are caring for someone who might have coronavirus.
  - If your Government has instructed everyone to wear a mask.
- There is a world-wide shortage of masks, so WHO urges people to use masks wisely and make sure there are enough for healthcare workers.
- Disposable face masks can only be used once.
- If you have to use a mask, it will only protect you if you use it properly and if you regularly wash your hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Here is how to use your mask properly:
  - Wash your hands with soap and water or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer BEFORE you put on the mask
  - Cover your mouth and nose with the mask and make sure there are no gaps or spaces between your face and the mask
  - Do not touch the mask while using it. If you do, wash your hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer
  - To remove the mask, do not touch the front but remove the mask from the back and throw it away immediately into a bin that can close. Wash your hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer
  - You must always replace the mask when it becomes damp and you must never use a mask two or more times if it is a single use mask.
- The most effective ways to protect yourself and others against coronavirus are to frequently clean your hands, cover your cough with the bend of elbow or tissue, and limit your contact with other people by staying at home or maintaining a distance of at least 1 meter (3 feet) from other people. See the five simple rules on page one for more guidance.

3. Is coronavirus airborne?

- **Coronavirus does not spread through the air.**
- It spreads when someone who is infected with the virus coughs, sneezes or talks, and the droplets they release from their nose or mouth, get into the eyes, nose or mouth of a healthy person. These droplets are too heavy to hang in the air. They quickly fall on floors or surfaces.
- You can catch the coronavirus through these droplets in two ways;
  - When a person who has the virus sneezes or coughs next to you and is less than one metre away from you.
  - If the droplets land on surfaces like a table or doorknob, either because someone sneezes or coughs on them, or sneezes on their hand and touches the surface. You then touch the surface and then touch your own eyes, nose or mouth without washing your hands.
- This is why it is so important to keep a safe distance from people; you may have heard this referred to as 'social distancing'.
- The best way to prevent yourself and your loved ones from getting coronavirus is to follow the 5 simple rules on page one.

4. What can I use instead of hand sanitizer?

- **You don't actually need to use hand sanitizer.**
- Washing your hands with soap and water is the best and most effective way to clean your hands. You do not need to use a special type of soap – any liquid or hard soap will do.
- Soap and water are very effective at removing the virus from your hands, as long as you wash your hands properly for 20 seconds and cover all parts of the hands - fingers, thumbs, between fingers, under nails, palms and the back of your hands.
- This is good news because water and soap are usually more available than hand sanitizers.
- If you do use a hand sanitizer, make sure it is at least 60% alcohol as this is what is needed to kill the virus properly. Alcohol like vodka, rum and whiskey are only 40% alcohol so are not strong enough to kill the virus.
- Do not use ash and water, as ash cannot destroy the coronavirus.

5. Who can catch the coronavirus?

- **EVERYONE can catch coronavirus**, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, no matter where you come from, where you live or which religion you follow.
- The coronavirus comes from the same family of viruses as the cold or flu, so just as anyone can catch a cold, they can also catch coronavirus
- The virus has now spread to 196 countries around the world, and people from all continents have been affected, including Africans, Asians, Americans and Europeans.
- Although everyone can catch and spread coronavirus to others, elderly people or those with existing illnesses, such as tuberculosis, HIV or malnutrition, are more at risk as they seem to get more ill from the virus.
- People can spread COVID-19 to vulnerable groups even if they have no or mild symptoms, that is why we all need to take responsibility.
- So, no matter who you are, it is important that you follow the five simple rules on page one to keep yourself and your family safe – particularly your older relatives or those with existing illnesses.

IF THERE ARE QUESTIONS OR RUMOURS SPREADING IN YOUR COUNTRY CONTACT EVA.ERLACH@IFRC.ORG AND WE CAN TRY TO ADDRESS THEM IN THIS FACT SHEET.