Asymptomatic, Pre-symptomatic and Mild Signs and Symptoms of COVID-19

Risk Communication and Community Engagement messages

Background

Currently, more than 50% of African countries have reported community transmission of COVID-19. It has been noted that some of the infected individuals show symptoms and become ill while others are infected and do not show symptoms. Evidence has shown that individuals who do not show symptoms and are not ill can transmit COVID-19 thus creating concern among public health experts. The additional challenges at the community level is the belief that only people who show symptoms can transmit the disease. In order to address this aspect, it is critical to pay special attention to asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic cases of COVID-19 to provide appropriate messaging to avoid and reduce the risk of transmission at the community level.[1]

Who is an asymptomatic COVID-19 case?

An asymptomatic COVID-19 case is an individual who is infected with SARS-COV-2 but does not develop symptoms of COVID-19. These individuals have tested positive for SARs-CoV-2, but have not developed symptoms such as fever, cough or difficulty in breathing. Such people may deny their infection status or doubt the validity of the test procedures. As a result, they tend to resist or may ignore any advice regarding observing public health measures to prevent further transmission to other members of their families, friends and the community.

[1] Zhou P, Yang X-L, Wang X-G, et al. Discovery of a novel coronavirus associated with the recent pneumonia outbreak in humans and its potential bat origin. bioRxiv 2020.

Who is a pre-symptomatic COVID-19 case?

Pre-symptomatic COVID-19 cases are infected individuals who can infect others before they develop signs and symptoms of COVID-19. These people tend to transmit COVID-19 a few days (2-3 days) before developing signs and symptoms and this period is known as the pre-symptomatic or latent phase. Pre-symptomatic cases later develop signs and symptoms of COVID-19 but would have already passed on the infection unknowingly to other people.

Mild COVID-19 Cases

Some COVID-19 cases may present with mild signs and symptoms, but they can infect others. The common practice of waiting to get moderate to severe symptoms before taking preventive actions is detrimental to the health of others. COVID-19 can be transmitted by patients with or without symptoms.

Risk Communication and Community Engagement Actions

Asymptomatic, pre-symptomatic and cases with mild signs and symptoms must be explained to healthcare workers and the public carefully. The purpose is to advise them to always observe the recommended public health and social measures. It is likely that the person next to them could get infected because they are carrying the virus without knowing. Therefore, there is need to educate them to protect themselves and others.

Risk communication and community engagement teams must correctly explain asymptomatic, pre-symptomatic and cases with mild signs and symptoms in ways that everyone can understand while also building trust and engaging all stakeholders, including members of the

community. In order to minimize transmission, the following public health measures are recommended:

Practice hand hygiene

COVID-19 primarily spreads through respiratory droplets from infected people directly getting in contact with the mouth, nose or eyes or through touching an infected person and/or contaminated objects or surfaces. Therefore, your hands can spread the virus onto other surfaces and/or to your mouth, nose or eyes. Hand Hygiene is one of the most effective preventive measures you can practice to reduce the spread of COVID-19. We all can play a critical role in fighting COVID-19 by adopting frequent hand hygiene as a lifestyle. Always wash your hands with soap and water for at least 40 seconds or clean them with an alcohol-based hand rub for at least 20 seconds after touching surfaces or objects used by other people.

Keep physical distance

COVID-19 can spread directly from person to person when someone coughs, or sneezes and the droplets reach the nose, mouth or eyes of another person. It is difficult to identify or know who is infected with COVID-19. Therefore, it is recommended to avoid close contact with anyone especially people outside your household. Stay at home as much as possible and go out only when it is essential.

Respiratory etiquette

When coughing or sneezing, always cover your mouth and nose with a flexed elbow or with a disposable tissue paper   Discard the tissue paper in a covered waste bin immediately after using it and wash your hands. This action will protect others from getting infected with the virus.

Use of a face mask

Using a clean face mask prevents respiratory droplets from reaching your face or someone else's face if someone coughs, sneezes, talks or sings. Place the mask carefully, ensuring that it covers your mouth, nose and chin. Fix it securely to the back of your head with the attached string to minimize any gaps between the face and the mask. Avoid touching the surface of the mask while wearing it and replace the mask with a new clean, dry one as soon as it becomes damp. For effective protection against COVID-19 infection, you must combine the use of mask with other protective measures such as hand hygiene and physical distancing (avoiding crowds). Masks made from Nylon and polyester materials are more effective than those made from cotton or gauze materials.

When choosing a non-medical mask, it is recommended that you choose a mask that you can easily breathe through, with more than one layer and an inner layer of absorbent material such as cotton.

- When wearing a mask, make sure you can breathe through it easily,
- Do not use Masks with only have one layer,
- Choose fabrics which can be washed in high temperatures regularly,
- Fabric masks should have the following layers, type of fabrics and composition:

  • An inner layer of absorbent material, such as cotton,
  • A middle layer of non-woven material, such as polypropylene
  • An outer layer of non-absorbent material, such as polyester or polyester blend