

Self care and COVID-19

By Helen Donovan, Self Care Forum Chair, Royal College of Nursing's Professional Lead for Public Health and the James Bond of coronavirus

Don't panic – it's just more information on coronavirus! Hard not to quell the rising fear when faced with front page news, running television commentary, masks on public transport, hand gel being brandished like weapons, 'the Wuhan shake' in place of a hand shake making us all look as if we are doing a strange chicken dance. Has the world gone mad with overreaction and the reality is that it is "no worse than flu" (which let's face it can be rather grim) or is this a mass conspiracy theory where information and misinformation need spy level training?

What can you do and how can you look after yourself and those you love? Think of me as the James Bond of coronavirus if you will?

[This](#) useful infographic from the BBC gives simple self care steps for protecting yourself and what to do should you feel ill or think you are at risk.

What IS coronavirus?

Coronavirus infections are not new and are a common cause of the common cold. This particular coronavirus disease, or COVID-19 for short, is caused by infection with a new strain of the virus: severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) which was first identified in late December 2019 (hence the 19 for COVID-19). It was first seen in the city of Wuhan in China but has since then spread across the world to over 100 countries or regions of the world.

Why the panic?

The reason for the worry is because it is a new infection and the full impact of it or how it will affect people is not yet fully understood. There is however, a lot we do know. The infection causes high temperature, headache, cough, shortness of breath / difficulties in breathing and muscle aches. See [here](#) on the World Health Organization web site. For most people the infection is short lived with relatively mild symptoms. In general, four out of five people who have COVID-19, symptoms will be mild, and recovery will occur without the need for general practice or hospital treatment.

For some, the elderly and particularly those who have other medical conditions such as chronic lung disease, diabetes or heart disease, the illness is far more severe. Sadly, as with flu every year some people will die as a result of coronavirus infection, however the full impact of COVID-19 is currently unknown.

Is there treatment?

This is a viral infection and as such antibiotics will have absolutely no effect. Treatment is simply supporting symptoms as you would with a cold – for example taking paracetamol if you have a fever, drinking fluids and resting. Globally, work is happening apace to develop a vaccine but there is nothing available yet. Vaccine production and testing is rigorous and a new release specific for COVID-19 is unlikely to be for at least a year.

How can I reduce the risk of catching it?

The virus spreads mostly through the respiratory route – that is as a result of coughing and sneezing. The best advice is therefore to minimise the spread of infection:

- Sensible hygiene precautions: regular hand washing with soap and hot water is the best way of removing the virus. Wash for 20 seconds with soap – sing Happy Birthday twice to yourself! But most importantly wash hands properly and thoroughly! While this may sound patronising we know that most people do not wash their hands properly or as often as they should, see the [RCN guideline](#) on how to wash hands effectively.
- When handwashing isn't possible, use alcohol-based hand gel or rub, this needs to be 65% alcohol or above, anything else will not kill the virus.
- Cough or sneeze into a tissue and throw the tissue away in a bin. If you don't have a tissue, use the crook of your elbow which will avoid getting the germs on your hands and further spreading these around as you touch things.
- Don't forget to wash your hands after using the tissues.
- Avoid touching your face, mouth and eyes as this will spread the virus.
- People should not wear surgical face masks for day to day use. These masks are only designed to last for 15 – 20 minutes at most. After this time they will become wet with your breath and the virus may pass through. They also tend to make people touch their face more often which spreads the virus. Unless specifically advised as part of self isolation by the public health agencies, do not purchase or wear a face mask of any description.
- Try to avoid close contact with anyone who is unwell to minimise the spread of infection.

These tips are further explained on the [NHS website](#).

What information can I trust?

The situation is changing rapidly so it is really important for the public to look at the reputable NHS or public health web sites for the most up to date information. See the [RCN web site](#) which highlights the key resources for the public as well as health care staff. If travelling check on the foreign and commonwealth office web site and with travel agents.

Who do I call if I feel ill?

- If you are concerned call NHS 111 or in parts of Wales where this is not available people should call NHS Direct on 0845 46 47 and in Northern Ireland, call your GP.
- Look out for vulnerable neighbours, friends and family members and make sure they have enough food and drink as well as supplies of medicines.
- If you know people are alone and self-isolating or unable to get out make a point of contacting them by phone, social media - or even a letter!
- Check the self care forum web site [fact sheets](#) on how to help yourself.
- You may be advised to isolate yourself (self isolate) this is to help minimise the chance of you passing on the infection to others. There is a useful [blog](#) from PHE with information and guidance on what this means

Still panicking? I hope you feel a little more reassured and there are things you can do to protect and look after yourselves and your families and friends.

Remember, for four out of five people who have COVID-19, symptoms will be mild, and recovery will occur without the need for general practice or hospital treatment.

[Doctors of the World](#) has produced coronavirus (Covid-19), advice for people in 21 languages.