



WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 16 March 2020

16 March 2020

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Good afternoon everyone.

In the past week, we have seen a rapid escalation of cases of COVID-19.

More cases and deaths have now been reported in the rest of the world than in China.

We have also seen a rapid escalation in social distancing measures, like closing schools and cancelling sporting events and other gatherings.

But we have not seen an urgent enough escalation in testing, isolation and contact tracing – which is the backbone of the response.

Social distancing measures can help to reduce transmission and enable health systems to cope.

Handwashing and coughing into your elbow can reduce the risk for yourself and others.

But on their own, they are not enough to extinguish this pandemic. It's the combination that makes the difference.

As I keep saying, all countries must take a comprehensive approach.

But the most effective way to prevent infections and save lives is breaking the chains of transmission. And to do that, you must test and isolate.

You cannot fight a fire blindfolded. And we cannot stop this pandemic if we don't know who is infected.

We have a simple message for all countries: test, test, test.

Test every suspected case.

If they test positive, isolate them and find out who they have been in close contact with up to 2 days before they developed symptoms, and test those people too. [NOTE: WHO recommends testing contacts of confirmed cases only if they show symptoms of COVID-19]

Every day, more tests are being produced to meet the global demand.

WHO has shipped almost 1.5 million tests to 120 countries. We're working with companies to increase the availability of tests for those most in need.

WHO advises that all confirmed cases, even mild cases, should be isolated in health facilities, to prevent transmission and provide adequate care.

But we recognize that many countries have already exceeded their capacity to care for mild cases in dedicated health facilities.

In that situation, countries should prioritize older patients and those with underlying conditions.

Some countries have expanded their capacity by using stadiums and gyms to care for mild cases, with severe and critical cases cared for in hospitals.

Another option is for patients with mild disease to be isolated and cared for at home.

Caring for infected people at home may put others in the same household at risk, so it's critical that care-givers follow WHO's guidance on how to provide care as safely as possible.

For example, both the patient and their care-giver should wear a medical mask when they are together in the same room.

The patient should sleep in a separate bedroom to others and use a different bathroom.

Assign one person to care for the patient, ideally someone who is in good health and has no

underlying conditions.

The care-giver should wash their hands after any contact with the patient or their immediate environment.

People infected with COVID-19 can still infect others after they stop feeling sick, so these measures should continue for at least two weeks after symptoms disappear.

Visitors should not be allowed until the end of this period.

There are more details in WHO's guidance.

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Once again, our key message is: test, test, test.

This is a serious disease. Although the evidence we have suggests that those over 60 are at highest risk, young people, including children, have died.

WHO has issued new clinical guidance, with specific details on how to care for children, older people and pregnant women.

So far, we have seen epidemics in countries with advanced health systems. But even they have struggled to cope.

As the virus moves to low-income countries, we're deeply concerned about the impact it could have among populations with high HIV prevalence, or among malnourished children.

That's why we're calling on every country and every individual to do everything they can to stop transmission.

Washing your hands will help to reduce your risk of infection. But it's also an act of solidarity because it reduces the risk you will infect others in your community and around the world. Do it for yourself, do it for others.

We also ask people to express their solidarity by refraining from hoarding essential items, including medicines.

Hoarding can create shortages of medicines and other essential products, which can exacerbate suffering.

We're grateful to everyone who has contributed to the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund.

Since we launched it on Friday, more than 110,000 people have contributed almost 19 million U.S. dollars.

These funds will help to buy diagnostic tests, supplies for health workers and support research and development.

If you would like to contribute, please go to [who.int](https://www.who.int) and click on the orange “Donate” button at the top of the page.

We’re also grateful for the way different sectors of society are coming together.

This started with the SafeHands Challenge, which has attracted celebrities, world leaders and people everywhere demonstrating how to wash their hands.

This afternoon WHO and the International Chamber of Commerce issued a joint call to action to the global business community. The ICC will send regular advice to its network of more than 45 million businesses, to protect their workers, customers and local communities, and to support the production and distribution of essential supplies.

I’d like to thank Paul Polman, Ajay Banga and John Denton for their support and collaboration.

WHO is also working with Global Citizen to launch the Solidarity Sessions, a series of virtual concerts with leading musicians from around the world.

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This is the defining global health crisis of our time.

The days, weeks and months ahead will be a test of our resolve, a test of our trust in science, and a test of solidarity.

Crises like this tend to bring out the best and worst in humanity.

Like me, I’m sure you have been touched by the videos of people applauding health workers from their balconies, or the stories of people offering to do grocery shopping for older people in their community.

This amazing spirit of human solidarity must become even more infectious than the virus itself. Although we may have to be physically apart from each other for a while, we can come together in ways we never have before.

We’re all in this together. And we can only succeed together.

So the rule of the game is: together.

Thank you.

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