

Newsletter 10 March

Coronavirus – Important Information

Over the past weeks I have been inundated with questions about the coronavirus. I thought it may be helpful for me to outline the facts around the outbreak, and highlight some practical precautionary measures we should take. There is a lot of misinformation out there.

The first case of coronavirus was documented on 31 December 2019 in Wuhan City, Hubei Province in China. Initially the majority of cases were linked to seafood, poultry and live wildlife markets but later as the number of cases increased evidence of person-to-person transmission emerged. Numerous people who were in China over New Year were either infected or inadvertently exported the virus to other countries. The country with most positive cases outside of China at this stage is Italy, where revellers gathered for a festival earlier in 2020.

Last week the coronavirus was imported to South Africa by a person who had travelled to Italy. To date five of his direct contacts (who were on the same tour) as well as his wife have tested positive (a total of 7) persons.

The virus has a 5 - 14 day incubation period so the travel-related guidelines are as follows:

If you have been to a country where there are known cases of coronavirus you must self-quarantine (stay at home) for 14 days on your return to South Africa, whether you are showing symptoms or not. This means separating persons who may have been exposed to the disease from non-exposed persons.

- This also means staying away from public places (grocery shopping or malls), public transport and the workplace.

The virus has a 5 - 14 day incubation period so the travel-related guidelines are as follows:

Should the person in self-quarantine develop symptoms of fever, sore throat, cough or shortness of breath, they must then contact either their doctor (by telephone only) or preferably the 24 hour general public coronavirus hotline: 0800 029 999.

DO NOT WALK INTO ANY HEALTHCARE FACILITY AS THIS WOULD EXPOSE YOURSELF TO OTHER PERSONS WHO WOULD OTHERWISE NOT BE EXPOSED. A healthcare worker on the hotline will refer you to a testing centre in your area or visit you in your home in order to obtain a swab sample for testing. The healthcare facility concerned will be notified and the ER doctor attending to you will be in a full hazmat suit, wearing gloves, mask, apron & glasses. These tests are free of charge.

No travel - international or domestic, should be done unless absolutely necessary. Both Cape Town International and Oliver Tambo airports (international airports) are high risk areas for being inadvertently exposed to the virus.

As the general public I urge you to be responsible about this matter. The main route of transmission we believe is respiratory droplets (moisture in your exhaled breath) or excretion in stools. The virus is transmitted when respiratory droplets generated via coughing, sneezing or talking come into contact with susceptible mucous surfaces such as eyes, mouth and nose. Droplets can also land on any surface, allowing the virus to be transmitted indirectly from hands to mucous surfaces. Hand hygiene is therefore imperative.

Quarantine can curtail the coronavirus spread and this can therefore reduce the epidemic.

Please note that it is not necessary to be tested for any fever, cough or sore throat if you have not had any real risk of having been in contact with the virus. It would be irresponsible to burden our testing facilities with people who do not fit the exposure risk criteria as we need the maximum resources available to those in dire need.

What can you do to reduce your risk:

1. Wash your hands
2. Avoid crowds/meeting/gatherings
3. Cover your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing
4. Avoid close contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing and sneezing.

I hope this helps you to put the coronavirus situation in perspective. Let's work together to minimise the spread of this virus.

Yours in health

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Louise". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.

Dr Louise Wiggins