

# It is time for all of us to play our part in the fight against the novel coronavirus in the Pacific



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Our Region is at a critical juncture in the novel coronavirus (now known as COVID-19) outbreak. While the vast majority of cases are still in China, as of 14 February, 2020 the virus has also been confirmed in 24 other countries on several continents. And there are now cases of local transmission in several countries, increasing the risk of onward spread.

The latest information suggests that the virus may be more transmissible than early data indicated. This does not mean that COVID-19 will start spreading within the Pacific or elsewhere tomorrow, or perhaps ever. Of course, we hope that the virus will not reach Pacific shores. However, while countries such as China are still working hard to contain COVID-19, all countries of the world must prepare for the possibility of COVID-19 cases.

In case of community transmission, there are two main risks of importance to the Pacific. First, health care facilities could rapidly become overwhelmed, with even a

relatively small number of COVID-19 cases. This means that health facilities may not be able to focus on treating the most vulnerable and severe cases.

Another major risk is that people with even mild symptoms may come to the health facilities, potentially amplifying the virus' spread by infecting other patients.

These are situations we must anticipate and avoid.

While I am now advising other countries of our region to intensify preparedness for wider community transmission of the virus, I fully recognise the Pacific-specific challenges that multiple islands, vast distances and limited resources pose. In this context, the intensive efforts developed by all governments of the Pacific to protect their people by focusing on increased surveillance and strengthening public health measures at the border are critically important. And as of today, no case has been confirmed in the Pacific. This is great news – and of course, the objective should be to keep it that way. At the same time, we must also play our part in preparing for the possibility of cases in Pacific communities.

I understand why people are worried, as this is a new disease and there is much we still don't know. The best thing we can do at this time is to be as prepared as possible.

In addition to measures governments are already taking, we all share a collective responsibility to act to protect ourselves, our communities, and the most vulnerable among us. The best thing you can do to protect yourself and those around you from COVID-19, and other respiratory illnesses, is to wash your hands – frequently, and thoroughly. If you are coughing or sneezing, cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or with the fold of your elbow. Keep your distance – at least 1 metre – from people who are unwell. If you are sick, stay at home so you don't risk infecting others, and seek medical care if you have trouble breathing.

In addition to the COVID-19 outbreak, we are also fighting a global epidemic of misinformation, an "info-demic". Please, don't circulate rumours and misinformation online and to your friends and family. When people have unconfirmed or inaccurate information, they can make decisions which harm themselves, and others. Don't believe everything you read online, and stick to trusted sources, such as WHO and government authorities.

Strengthening preparedness for health emergencies and outbreaks has always been, and will continue to be, a priority for WHO in the Western Pacific Region. As part of this, the World Health Organization, with its partners, will continue to support the Pacific in their COVID-19 preparedness and response efforts.

The current outbreak is a test for all of us. It is time for us to work together and focus not only on what confronts us today, but plan for tomorrow, taking steps to protect every corner of the Pacific – in order to minimise the health, social and economic impacts of COVID-19, and keep people, families and islands safe. – **WHO, February 14, 2020**