

Current major event

Risk communication efforts in response to COVID-19 outbreak

As the response effort against the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak intensifies, WHO Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office (EMRO) has produced a number of risk communication materials covering every area of concern to support the countries in the region, to share appropriate preventive messages across all sectors. (See table 1)

Editorial note

The world first became aware of a novel coronavirus on 31 December 2019 when China announced the detection of a cluster of pneumonia cases of unknown etiology in Wuhan City, Hubei Province. The subsequent sequencing of the virus, along with the availability of the testing kits, provided the world with the tools to rapidly identify what later became known as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). This is a new disease with no protective vaccine or specific treatment currently available. To slow transmission and protect people against the disease during these first weeks and months it has become essential to raise public awareness about how this virus spreads and which behavioural etiquettes people should follow.

Knowing that the disease had originated in animals but is now spreading through human-to-human transmission, as virological and epidemiological data made clear, allowed the immediate development of risk communication materials that advised people to basic information about the disease and the measures to prevent and protect against the spread of the disease particularly through simple behavioural change. The communication materials can also address the misinformation spreading through traditional mass media or social media about the disease, and provide facts and truth on ways to protect against and prevent the spread of the virus. The respiratory nature of the disease and its similarity to Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) also opened the way for the use of previously developed messages related to cough etiquette, food consumption and things to watch out for in mass gatherings and within the workplace. Messages were adopted into Arabic, English and French as the three official UN languages widely in use across the Region, but were further translated by country offices into other local languages where relevant. Health care workers and school administrators were given special attention in the developed materials due to the important role they play in caring for and protecting vulnerable populations as these materials were produced in a form that can be printed as posters or flyers for easy sharing.

In the meantime, simple bite-sized messages were developed for use over the different social media platforms to quickly reach online communities about the disease and the behaviours that started to emerge as a result of its spread. Initial

Table 1: Sample materials developed and adopted for the Region



Link: <http://www.emro.who.int/health-topics/corona-virus/information-resources.html>

Number of 2019-nCoV Cases reported Globally, as of 01 March 2020

WHO Regions	Countries affected	Number of confirmed cases
Western Pacific Region	10	84818
European Region	31	2136
South-East Asia Region	5	49
Eastern Mediterranean Region	11	1147
Region of the Americas	6	90
African Region	2	2
International Conveyance (Diamond princess)	-	706
Total	65	88948

materials that addressed handwashing and food safety practices eventually gave way to the proper use and handling of facemasks. The lack of vaccines and treatment for the disease opened the door for public speculation over possible traditional and exotic treatments, and the lack of scientific knowledge about the virus and how it works gave way to urban myths about how to kill it. WHO's remedy to these fast-spreading rumours was the development of myth-busting infographics that addressed many of the misinformation that spread through this infodemic.

WHO continues to share information as it becomes available to it through a variety of other formats including text, questions and answers, video messages and online courses. WHO websites at the global and regional levels share materials in multiple languages and link up to each other to route visitors to more materials prepared at the three levels of the organization. Improved partnerships with other UN, international, non-governmental and faith-based organizations growing, so contributing to reach more people with accurate and scientifically-based information that can counter the more sensational materials that attract an audience but misinforms them at the same time.

Update on outbreaks in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

CoVID-19 in 11 EMR countries; MERS in Saudi Arabia; cholera in Somalia; cholera in Yemen; multidrug-resistant typhoid fever in Pakistan.

Current public health events of concern [cumulative N° of cases (deaths), CFR %]

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): 2019-2020	
Afghanistan	[1 (0)]
Bahrain	[47 (0)]
Egypt	[2 (0)]
Iran	[978 (54), 5.52%]
Iraq	[19 (0)]
Kuwait	[56 (0)]
Lebanon	[10 (0)]
Oman	[6 (0)]
Pakistan	[4 (0)]
Qatar	[3 (0)]
United Arab Emirates	[21 (0)]
Cholera: 2017-2020	
Somalia	[11 642 (60), 0.52%]
Yemen	[2 263 304 (3 767), 0.17%]
MERS: 2012-2020	
Saudi Arabia	[2 122 (788), 37.13%]
Multidrug-resistant typhoid fever: 2016-2020	
Pakistan	[15 979 (0)]