The Rooted in Trust (RiT) project aims to address COVID-19 misinformation by collecting and analyzing rumors found on Afghan social media and from direct engagement with community members. In Afghanistan, Internews is working in partnership with three media organizations and in conjunction with the Inter-agency Risk Communication and Community Engagement Working Group (RCCE WG). This regular collection of community insights aims to address common questions and common misperceptions about COVID-19 found across Afghanistan. It aims to help field-based staff and frontline workers provide fact-based answers communities’ questions and concerns.

COVID-19 SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN:
As of 20 December 2020, 50,677 people across all 34 provinces in Afghanistan were confirmed to have had COVID-19 (OCHA, 20/12/20). Afghanistan continues to see an increase of COVID-19 cases with nearly 1,500 new cases recorded from 3 to 10 December 2020. There are limited facilities for testing and with only 189,385 people having been tested (at 20 December 2020), with a test positive rate of 30%, there is an implication of under-testing of potential cases. Migration across the Iran and Pakistan borders, movement of internally displaced people, lack of adequate hygiene facilities for a number of the population and the return to schooling in environments where it is difficult to socially distance, are some of the many challenges to containing the virus.

*Numbers only reflect confirmed cases. Due to testing limitations the numbers are likely to be much higher.

In this bulletin, Internews profiles commonly occurring rumours from social media and community engagement feedback collected from 10 - 24 November 2020 by Internews’ media partners Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, Pajhwok Afghan News and Salam Watandar in addition to feedback shared from humanitarian organizations: The International Organization for Migration (IOM), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), The Johanniter International Assistance (JIA), Coordination of Rehabilitation and Development Services for Afghanistan (CRDSA), Rural Rehabilitation Association for Afghanistan (RRO) and Afghan Youth Service Organization (AYSO) from 7 October – 2 December 2020.

Rumours highlighted relate to various topics including potential treatments for COVID-19 and reinfection amongst others. Rumours were selected based on the frequency of the theme they represent, the risk to the community and the believability.

WHAT ARE PEOPLE SAYING?
This bulletin is based on an analysis of 695 pieces of feedback. People continue to share rumours that COVID-19 is a hoax: either that Muslims should not believe in the virus, or that it is typhoid or the common fly. Rumours also persist that the pandemic is an elaborate hoax by foreign governments or the Afghan government in order to access funds. Rumours and feedback on the theme of treatment/cures and preventatives for the virus represented more than one third of the data gathered and one the most commonly occurring themes. Many of them claim that onion, ginger, lemon, honey, black seeds, black tea and even drugs such as opium, are preventatives or cures for COVID-19. While some natural remedies such as ginger may help to alleviate symptoms associated with COVID-19 there is no approved preventative treatment or cure for the virus. Other commonly occurring themes include COVID-19 impacts. Much of the feedback was around unemployment, economic hardship, lack of access to education, mental health, violence and lockdowns which demonstrate the concerns that people have in the recent resurgence of cases and the possibility of future hardship.
Both males and females are able to contract COVID-19. Globally, data shows that men are more likely to die of the virus than women, however we are still learning whether the virus impacts women and men differently. The percentage of Afghan women who have tested positive for the virus is so far less than men. Of the total number of people who are confirmed to have COVID-19, males make up 68.4%. Experts believe it is likely the result of gender inequalities that shut women out of the health care system according to The New York Times.

Protect yourself using these measures from the WHO:

- Regularly wash hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Cover your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze and then dispose of the tissue immediately.
- Keep one metre distance from someone sneezing or coughing.
- Encourage them to stay in the home for at least a week.
- Call the doctor if it becomes hard for them to breathe.
- Wear a mask at all times when interacting with them.
- Wash your hands regularly for at least 20 seconds.
- Avoid sharing items or food with them.
- Avoid unnecessary trips out of the house, but if needed, it is important to continue to practice protective health behaviors like mask-wearing, hand-washing, and avoiding crowded places.

It is possible to transmit the virus and be infected without showing any symptoms or sign of illness.

COVID-19 is easily spread from one person to another through coughing, sneezing, hugging, or handshakes. If an infected person sneezes onto their hand and then touches a surface, the virus can spread to the next person that touches that place.

Common symptoms of the virus are fever, dry cough, and tiredness.

Several studies have highlighted that some people infected with COVID-19 do not show any symptoms, they are called asymptomatic. Remember, that if a family member falls ill, and you are well, it may be possible that you have contracted the virus and can infect others. This is especially dangerous if you come into contact with older people or people who have pre-existing conditions who are more at risk of falling very ill.

If you are caring for a sick friend or family member:

- Encourage them to stay in the home for at least a week.
- Call the doctor if it becomes hard for them to breathe.
- Wear a mask at all times when interacting with them.
- Wash your hands regularly for at least 20 seconds.
- Avoid sharing items or food with them.
- Avoid unnecessary trips out of the house, but if needed, it is important to continue to practice protective health behaviors like mask-wearing, hand-washing, and avoiding crowded places.

We welcome your feedback, questions, and suggestions to help local media produce reliable and accurate reporting on COVID-19. Please contact: Mary Menis, Internews Humanitarian Liaison Officer, mmenis@internews.org.
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LOW RISK

All people, young and old can catch COVID-19. As stated in a report by Johns Hopkins Medicine hopkinsmedicine.org often when younger people, especially children, catch the virus their symptoms may be very mild. This does not mean that they cannot spread the virus to older people, or people vulnerable with other health conditions. In rare cases, children can become very sick with COVID-19, and die. That’s why it is important to follow the steps below to ease the symptoms of your child and protect yourself and others in the home, as well as those in your community.

According to Public Health Canada who have mild COVID-19 symptoms are able to stay at home with a caregiver throughout their recovery without needing hospitalization. If you are caring for a child who has or may have COVID-19, it is important to follow the steps below to protect yourself and others in the home, as well as those in your community.

- Wash your hands and those of your child often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds if soap and water are not available and if your hands do not look dirty, use an alcohol-based sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands and encourage your child not to touch their face, either.
- Your child should remain in your home or in a monitored outdoor space, should not play with friends or go to school or to public areas, and should not be within 2 metres of others if possible.
- Encourage the child to use tissues or cough/sneeze into their elbow to decrease the spread of respiratory droplets. Do not share personal items with the child, such as toothbrushes, towels, bed linen, utensils or electronic devices.
- Do not share food and drinks. Use a separate bathroom from the child if possible. If not possible, put the toilet lid down before flushing.
- Medical masks, if available and tolerable, for the child and the caregiver. If not available, use a non-medical mask or face covering.

ANSWER

RUMOUR #5

‘A person in Sare Pol province who has introduced himself as a professor, sells snake oil and claimed to have treated corona virus along with hundreds of other diseases.’ Facebook

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has given rise to a number of fake cures and treatments falsely claiming to treat or prevent the virus, and have been disseminated on social media. Many people are trying to benefit from this pandemic by selling products they claim will cure the disease. These products have often not been tested to prove they work or that they are safe to use.

There is currently no approved treatment for coronavirus (COVID-19), and certainly snake oil is not a cure. However you can often ease the symptoms at home until you fully recover. Take care of yourself. Get rest and stay hydrated. Take over-the-counter medicines, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen, to help you feel better and drink plenty of fluids.

Keep practicing preventative measures. Handwashing with soap, wearing a mask and keeping a physical distance are the main steps recommended by health professionals to protect yourself and help prevent spreading the virus to others.

Call the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) national hotline on 166 or your provincial MoPH hotline if you need more information.

ANSWER

RUMOUR #6

‘Lemon with warm water eliminates the virus before reaching to the lungs.’ Facebook

Drinking lemon with warm water is a good way to hydrate your body if you are feeling unwell – but lemons will not prevent the virus.

Consuming acidic drinks like lemon juice has no effect on coronavirus infections. Lemon juice will not destroy viruses in your body or stop the copying process.

Lemons contain Vitamin C, an essential nutrient that is important for your overall health. However, there is no evidence that lemons or dietary supplements containing Vitamin C can “boost” your immune system to protect you from infections.

The best way to protect yourself against COVID-19 is to avoid becoming exposed to it:

- Regularly wash hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Cover your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or tissue when you cough or, and then dispose the tissue immediately.
- Keep at least 1 metre distance from someone sneezing or coughing.
Wearing face masks can be uncomfortable, but it is an important step to stop catching, and spreading viruses like COVID-19. As the WHO describes: air circulates through the mask, but the harmful droplets that may cause infection are stopped. Because of this, you can wear a mask for a long time and still get all the oxygen you need.

Clean your hands before you put your mask on as well as before and after you take it off, and after you touch the mask at any time.

Make sure it covers both your nose, mouth and chin, and that it is tight enough to allow you to breathe normally. When you take off a mask, store it in a clean plastic bag and if you are reusing a mask, make sure to wash it every day with soap and water to prevent skin irritation. Remember: do not use masks with valves. Medical masks (also known as surgical masks) are flat or pleated; they are affixed to the head with straps or have ear loops. If you cannot access a medical mask, use a piece of cloth to cover your mouth.

It is important to wash your hands regularly. Hand sanitizer can be used if you don’t have access to soap and water. If you have sensitive skin or other skin issues, you may want to proceed with caution when choosing a hand sanitizer. Thankfully, there are alcohol-free hand sanitizers on the market that contain antimicrobial essential oils, which are both safe and effective for people with sensitive skin. Will they protect you against coronavirus? Most experts do not think so. However, for day-to-day use, when trying to prevent colds and the flu, natural hand sanitizers without alcohol can help.

There is currently no ‘cure’ for COVID-19. Some people may use traditional remedies, that might reduce the symptoms (like fever or coughing) and make you feel more comfortable, but they do not cure the disease. Many people are trying to profit from this pandemic by selling products they claim will cure the disease. These products have often not been tested to prove they work or that they are safe to use.

The Ministry of Public Health Afghanistan (MoPH) has not approved the drops being pushed by Abdul Hakim Alokozai. In June 2020, the MoPH reported it had tested the treatment and found that it included a combination of pain killers, herbs and illegal drugs. This is a very dangerous mix of ingredients that are very addictive and could be dangerous to eat or drink.

If you think you have COVID-19 you should:
- Get tested (if possible)
- Isolate yourself in your home (ideally in a room with good ventilation)
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water
- Always wear mask to prevent spread of the virus to others
- Rest and drink plenty of fluids
- Visit the doctor if you find it hard to breathe