

Strengthening the Health Systems Response to COVID-19

Technical guidance #4 Community Pharmacy (1 May 2020)

This paper is one of a set of technical guidance papers developed by the WHO Regional Office for Europe to provide practical information and resources for decision-makers on measures to strengthen the health system response to COVID-19.

The purpose of this paper is to support pharmacists and other staff working in community pharmacies with guidance on the issues raised by the COVID-19 outbreak.

This paper supports the operationalization of the policy recommendations for the WHO European Region on strengthening the health system response to COVID-19, focusing on policy recommendation No. 11 (Table 1).

Table 1 Summary of 16 health system policy recommendations to respond to COVID-19

1. Expand capacity for communication and pro-actively manage media relations.	2. Bolster capacity of essential public health services to enable emergency response.	3. Clarify first point of contact strategy for possible COVID-19 cases: phone, online, physical.	4. Protect other potential first contact health system entry points.
5. Designate hospitals to receive COVID-19 patients and prepare to mobilize acute and ICU surge capacity.	6. Organize and expand services close to home for COVID-19 response.	7. Maintain continuity of essential services while freeing up capacity for COVID-19 response.	8. Train, repurpose and mobilize the health workforce according to priority services.
9. Protect the physical health of frontline health workers.	10. Anticipate and address the mental health needs of the health workforce.	11. Review supply chains and stocks of essential medicines and health technologies.	12. Mobilize financial support and ease logistic and operational barriers.
13. Assess and mitigate potential financial barriers to accessing care.	14. Assess and mitigate potential physical access barriers for vulnerable groups of people.	15. Optimize social protection to mitigate the impact of public health measures on household financial security.	16. Ensure clarity in roles, relationships and coordination mechanisms in health system governance and across government.

The guidance will be updated on a regular basis using best available evidence and emergent country practices in response to the COVID-19 outbreak in the WHO European Region, including

knowledge and evidence generated through the joint WHO Regional Office for Europe/EU Commission/European Observatory platform.

During the COVID-19 health crisis, pharmacists are likely to have an enhanced role in supporting health care systems that may be overburdened managing seriously ill patients. Those unwell may first visit a pharmacy to seek professional advice on the management of their symptoms.

This paper does not replace advice provided by national governments or professional pharmacy associations in each country. However, in the absence of specific guidance, pharmacists should consider the following advice.

1. Key issues

Pharmacists and other staff working in community pharmacies must be aware of the signs and symptoms of COVID-19 infection and of the correct referral pathways as advised by national authorities when possible COVID-19 infection is suspected.

Reinforce messages about physical distancing, staying at home, self-isolation and quarantine in line with national recommendations. These requirements may change frequently, and current advice must be provided.

Pharmacists must be aware of national guidance on the appropriate and correct use of masks, when these are recommended, and on how to wash hands properly. Where possible infographics or other materials should be available to the general public.

Pharmacists have an important role in countering misinformation and responding to misleading and false claims about the effectiveness of various treatments for COVID-19. There are no approved treatments for COVID-19. Some medicines are under trial to assess the risks and benefits of their use in COVID-19 infection.

Pharmacists must be aware of and conform with national regulations regarding the appropriate use of personal protective equipment (PPE) in the pharmacy setting.

2. Recommendations and strategic actions

Pharmacy premises

- Minimize contact with customers and goods to reduce risk of virus transmission.
- Remove items such as toys and gifts from display to reduce touching of objects.
- Make hand sanitizer available for use by customers, especially in areas where contact with people or goods may occur.
- Staff must wash their hands frequently, using soap and water and washing for at least 20 seconds. Where soap and water are not available, hand sanitizer may be used.
- Main contact surfaces in the pharmacy should be cleaned regularly, for example, every two hours, using an approved alcohol-based solution for cleaning.

- Limit the number of customers in the pharmacy at one time. Add floor markings to ensure customers are separated by at least 1.5 metres, especially where there may be a queue to collect medicines or advice.

Hours of work

- The increased demand for medicines and health advice may mean that governments have extended the regular opening hours of pharmacies.
- Consider dividing staff into teams that work different hours/shifts to ensure that there are enough staff in the pharmacy, even if someone gets infected and falls ill on one shift.
- Be aware of the heightened risks of transmitting the virus to family and friends because of your work in the pharmacy.

Medicines supply

- Recommend medicines in line with national guidelines for the management of COVID-19 infection.
- Be aware of problems with supply of commonly used medicines and where possible maintain suitable levels of buffer stocks to ensure supply to regular customers.
- Ensure continuity of supply for chronic medical conditions. Pharmacists must be aware of any special provisions to enable the supply of medicines such as asthma inhalers, contraceptives, antihypertensive medicines and medicines for heart and kidney disease without prescription.
- Fever and body aches and pains are common presentations in COVID-19 infection so painkillers may be requested. Paracetamol is recommended as the agent of choice.
- Consider restricting the quantities of medicines that may be supplied or sold to an individual if there is high demand or known shortages.
- Be aware of national guidance on acceptable substitutions for products in short supply. Substitution of some medicines may require a discussion with the prescribing doctor.
- Special attention should be given to supply where pharmacists have a role in coordinating supply of oxygen cylinders to patients or health care facilities. Shortages are likely.
- Consider increasing home delivery services for prescription and non-prescription medicines. Services may be provided in conjunction with community groups or agencies such as the Red Cross.
- Ensure easy-to-follow written instructions are provided for patients who are unable to visit the pharmacy.
- Be vigilant and report any concerns about suspected substandard and falsified products to appropriate national bodies.

Hand rub/hand disinfectants/sanitizer

- Consider limiting quantities of sales of handrub to avoid hoarding by individuals and to maximize access to this important preventive measure.
- Shortages of commercial supplies of hand sanitizer may mean that pharmacies need to prepare products to support and protect their community.

- WHO provides advice on the preparation of two formulations of handrub in their Guide to local production: WHO-recommended handrub formulations, which can be found at: https://www.who.int/gpsc/5may/guide_to_local_production.pdf

Helpful resources

Links to useful resources for pharmacists

WHO

- Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

WHO Regional Office for Europe

- Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19>

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)

- Fact sheet for health professionals on Coronaviruses: <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/factsheet-health-professionals-coronaviruses>

Pharmaceutical Group of the European Union (PGEU)

- COVID-19 information hub: <https://www.pgeu.eu/covid-19-information-hub/>

International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP)

- Position statement on the association between the use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (including ibuprofen), ace inhibitors, angiotensin receptor blockers (ARBs) and corticosteroids, and an increased risk of coronavirus/covid-19 infection or disease severity: <https://www.fip.org/files/content/priority-areas/coronavirus/FIP-Position-Statement-COVID-19-medicines.pdf>

European Medicines Agency

- EMA gives advice on the use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatories for COVID-19: <https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/news/ema-gives-advice-use-non-steroidal-anti-inflammatories-covid-19>