

WHAT IS COVID-19, HOW IS IT SPREAD AND WILL WE GET COVID-19 ON ST HELENA?

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 (CO=Corona, VI=Virus, D=Disease) is caused by the SARS-Cov2 virus which belongs to a large family of viruses, called Coronaviruses, found in both animals and humans. SARS-Cov2 is a new strain of Coronavirus that had not been previously identified in humans or detected before the outbreak was reported in Wuhan, China, in December 2019.

The complete clinical picture of COVID-19 is not fully understood. Initially it was categorised as a respiratory illness with people infected with COVID-19 reportedly experiencing mild symptoms including a runny nose, sore throat, cough, and fever. Further evidence suggests that COVID-19 can also have cardiovascular and neurological effects.

Symptoms can be more severe for some persons and can lead to pneumonia, breathing difficulties or death. People with pre-existing medical conditions (such as diabetes and heart disease) as well as older people are more vulnerable to becoming severely ill with the virus. While information so far suggests that most COVID-19 illness is mild, recent reports suggests serious illness occurs in up to 16% of cases (<https://www.who.int>).

St Helena remains free of COVID-19 and there are a number of strict measures in place, including mandatory quarantine for all new arrivals and strict infection control measures at points of entry (Airport and Harbour), to prevent the virus from getting into the community.

In the modern world we live in, the SARS-Cov2 virus spread all over the globe in less than six months. Small and remote communities like ours, or other small islands were not spared. They were affected (for example, consider the Marshall Islands <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-54728738> or the Falkland Islands) and despite preventative measures in place, it is probable that in time St Helena will record positive cases of COVID-19.

The Health Directorate's objective is to be able to identify a case as soon as possible, contain the case, and limit the spread to the rest of the community. This will be done by identification, management and isolation of cases and tracing the contacts of cases and isolating them from the rest of the community to limit the spread.

How is COVID-19 spread?

COVID-19 spreads primarily through contact with an infected person through respiratory droplets generated when a person, for example, coughs or sneezes, or through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose.

To prevent catching COVID-19 it is important that we practice good respiratory hygiene by sneezing or coughing into a flexed elbow or using a tissue and discarding it immediately into a closed bin. It is also very important that we wash our hands regularly with either alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water for 20 seconds making sure to clean all surfaces of the hands and in between fingers.

The average time from infection to onset of symptoms is 5-6 days. In the days following exposure, infected persons can transmit the virus to others before symptoms appear (1-3 days before symptom onset) and early in the course of illness.

A person who touches a surface or object that has the virus on it, then touches their eyes, nose or mouth before they clean their hands can also become infected.

Will we get COVID-19 on St Helena?

In my last article we looked at how other Overseas Territories like the Falkland Islands, Anguilla and Ascension Island dealt with COVID-19 cases, highlighting the measures they quickly implemented to ensure no further spread within their communities.

On St Helena we have robust preventative measures in place to protect the Island but we must be realistic in that one day COVID-19 could possibly come here.

Sources: World Health Organization

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HM Government

NHS

The difference between droplet and airborne transmission

Droplet transmission

Coughs and sneezes can spread droplets of saliva and mucus

Airborne transmission

Tiny particles, possibly produced by talking, are suspended in the air for longer and travel further

