



Social Distancing & the COVID-19 fight in Uganda

Get the Answer to your Question

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The transcript is from an interview with the Dean, School of Public Health Professor Rhoda Wanyenze during the Morning at NTV programme with Josephine Karungi on Tuesday April 7, 2020.

Question: What does social distancing actually mean and how does it look like?

Answer: Social distancing comes in several forms there is what you do as an individual but there is also social distancing at institutional even at a national level and its given different names.

- 1) The lockdown for example we have in Uganda and several countries in Africa and other parts of the world are also forms of social distancing in a way. It keeps us away from one another within the work place, within the market place, and all across the world.
- 2) At an individual level, social distancing is intended to keep you within in a distance where if somebody is

infected and they sneeze or they cough, the aerosols [particles] that transmit Coronavirus do not get to you as a person. If you are seated in the meeting and someone sneezes all of a sudden. It is based on the science and trying to measure how far do the aerosols that transmit the coronavirus actually go.

So currently the recommendation is at **least** two meters from each other. This is the recommendation of the Ministry of Health (Uganda), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). So a distance of at least two meters is good to keep apart from somebody. When they sneeze and you're too close, the aerosols can actually go directly onto your mouth or your eyes or nose and the virus can gain entry into the body.

Question: So is the recommendation requiring individuals to keep personal social distancing from others around them during this lockdown?

Answer: Sure! You must **socially distance** from everybody except the people you live with in your household. Unfortunately, one of the things we are struggling with is compliance. People are not going to work; they are not driving around, but then they have taken to physical exercises and running around in the evening, very early in the morning and you see so many people shoulder to shoulder. You don't know who you are running close to. And then, you go to the supermarkets and you actually find people also queuing up and they are very close to one another. This is really

defeating the whole purpose of social distancing recommendation, and each of us must do something about this new trend.

We need to commend those that have tried to give us some guidance. For example, I went to the C&A Pharmacy over the weekend and I found they had made some circles on the floor, where you are supposed to stand so that you keep some distance away from other people within the pharmacy. This is a very good and innovative idea, unfortunately, people are not complying again! They basically skip over the circle and you know again stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the next person in the queue. So we need a lot of information out there to mobilize the communities out there to know that this is really crucial in terms of

preventing covid-19. Social distancing is for everyone's good.

But, we must obviously know that social distancing alone might not be sufficient. Because we might have contaminated surfaces around us, door knobs, it might be your phone, so we need to be able to combine the **social distancing** with other preventive measures (hand-washing, cough etiquette, and being able to periodically disinfect the surfaces that are commonly used around us, the tables that we have in meeting rooms, the door knobs, sometimes we forget the phones.)

For journalists who use microphones, sometimes you move around with it and you find everybody touches that microphone and you wash your hands and you feel safe but actually that too can actually carry the virus. So we need to actually take on other measures and of course the toughest is not touching our eyes, our nose, and our mouths.

Journalist: *Some people still think COVID-19 is flu like any other flu, and that we have had more scary pandemics than this. From a professional point of view, what would you speak to such people?*

Answer: This is really serious. Just about a month ago, we were all debating, are Africans being immune? And this was all trending on all social media platforms and people were writing about how Africans are immune and the speculation that malaria was providing protection, and many other mythical things. Africans are certainly not immune.

Within less than a month, we are almost closing in on 7,000 Corona cases in

Africa. Normally after the first (index) cases, the spread of cases is much faster. If you look at the statement from the WHO-AFRO office, the number of cases in Africa is fast accelerating. As of April 6, every country in Africa, except Lesotho, has reported COVID cases. In South Africa alone, it is more than 1,500 now. While Uganda is at 52 cases now, we should not underestimate the burden of COVID.

The key issue with Covid is the buildup of the numbers that is so rapid, that the healthcare system may be overwhelmed. We have seen this in Italy, Spain, in USA especially in New York, and other countries. It is therefore important that we do everything possible not to reach those situations, because even developed healthcare systems can be overwhelmed. And if the healthcare system cannot cope, then people begin to die. So I think all of us need to work towards making sure that we are not one of those numbers, our loved ones within our families, the people that we work with are not part of those numbers and that we can seriously stop the build-up of the Covid cases. Let's not forget we have people also with HIV in Uganda estimated at 1.4million. We have people with TB, we have people with Malaria, we have women who still need to access services to deliver, children who need to be immunized and all the other conditions so with all the cases building up with Covid, our healthcare system would struggle to cope.

Each of us has a responsibility of making sure that we stop the spread of Covid, we stop the buildup of numbers so that we can preserve our healthcare systems and save Ugandans.

Question: *The COVID discussion started as a distant discussion, and now Covid is here with us. The number of cases is slowly increasing in Uganda. If an individual contracts COVID-19, what is next for them?*

Answer: The numbers could actually be more unless we do something more to adhere to the precautions. The data we see from other countries shows that anywhere between 30-50% of people that are infected with Covid don't actually show any signs and symptoms at all (asymptomatic). A person that you think is still safe might actually be infected and that person then is capable of infecting you. A significant proportion will begin to infect other people even before the symptoms show up. Somebody who is infected with Covid is still capable of transmitting. This is what makes it difficult to observe, and this is where the numbers could come from. It is the same reason the number of cases may be underestimated across the world.

It is critical to do wide testing, because without it, it is not easy to pick cases that are asymptomatic (those that don't have symptoms but they actually have the infection and they are capable of transmitting this to others). So we need to be very careful, the numbers might probably be much larger than we know across the world, and even here in Uganda. Social distancing is important here, because it is better to assume that everyone we are interacting with might be infected and could infect us as well, and so we need to stay away from each other during this lockdown.

Question: *So how do I know I could be sick, and then what do I do?*

Answer: First of all, we need to be equipped with the information. What are the signs and symptoms? You have to be able to detect the signs and symptoms. The most common is fever in about 90% cases from the global literature, and we are seeing that as well here in Uganda. There is also cough. About 70% of the people may develop a cough. But the cough then comes in sometimes later after you have manifested a fever for some time. And then comes in other flu-like symptoms. Not everybody with Covid manifests with those flu-like symptoms. So we might also not be suspicious but when you have high temperatures in this Covid season, and the temperatures are not coming down and then you have other signs like flu-like symptoms and some people will also start to have itchy eyes, then you need to ask for help. There are numbers that ministry of health has been widely circulating. We need to call and ask for help, we need to reach out to the health workers to guide us on the next step.

While we do that, we have to take responsibility to make sure that we are not circulating and interacting with people and that is why we have been emphasizing that you stay at home because it's not good for other people around you, it's not good for you to continue interacting and transmitting this infection to others. And then you also need to call very quickly so that you can get help to improve your own health.

Question: You mentioned earlier about testing, mass testing, I would like to hear your thoughts about that for Uganda. What do you think about mass testing?

Answer: Mass testing has been a challenge for many countries around the world like we have seen over the news. Even the USA is struggling with having just enough testing kits. Some countries have been able to come up with alternative testing and have been able to do it more massively like in China and other Asian countries. Uganda may not have the capacity to do a test for everybody. Now because of certain limitations. For example, each test, costs about US\$65 (one person). Assume you rolled out a test to just 50% of Uganda's population (20 million people), you need UGX 4.5 Trillion. And that's just a test of 50% of Ugandans. The budget for the entire Ministry of Health last year was about UGX 3.5 Trillion. You can see that we need more than one year budget for the Ministry of Health to conduct a test of half of our population.

In view of this challenge, the Ministry of Health has decided to conduct targeted testing. The MOH has developed a criteria on who should be tested – including

travel to category 1 countries, possibility of exposure to people who travelled, or exposure to that that tested positive, among others. So once you seek help through the MOH Toll-free lines, you get into the hands of the ministry of health and health workers, they do know this criteria, they will manage you and they will support you and when it's the right time to test you then you will be tested.

Question: We have heard of people who could have travelled and have not responded to the calls of MOH to come forward. Some of them are afraid, but some also genuinely feel they don't have the virus. What would you say to these individuals?

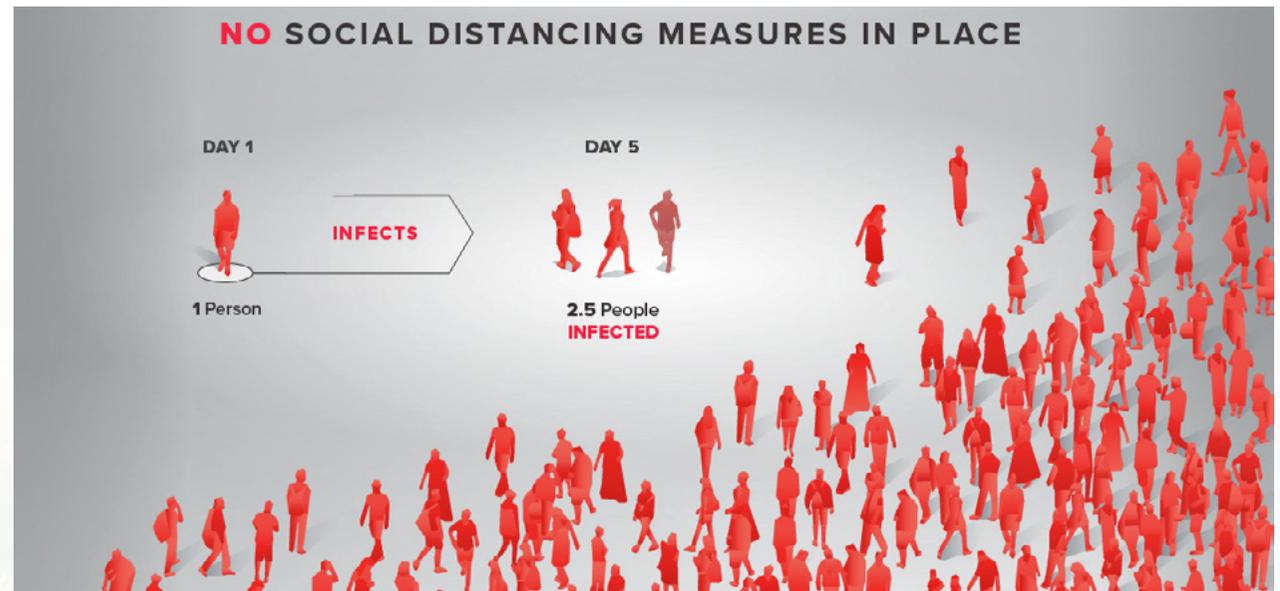
Answer: What I would say to them is please do come out. It's good for your own health, because you need to be screened. If you have Covid, then you can be supported, you can be treated earlier. But also it is good to protect the loved ones because you might think you have it or you don't have it, but then we know that half of the people who have it don't manifest symptoms. So you might actually be transmitting to the people immediately

around you, your loved ones. You might do well with it but they might not make it. So it's your responsibility to protect them by stepping forward that you can be screened and tested if it is necessary.

But now, we are getting to a point where we are going beyond the people that travelled. There are people who travelled and on their return, they were not quarantined immediately. These people got into contact with other people within our communities. So if you have also been in contact with somebody that has travelled from these countries, or was on some of these flights that MOH has been calling out, you need to come forward and be screened.

Question: Any final remarks?

Answer: My final word is that it is everyone's responsibility to stop the spread of COVID-19. Transmission of an infection is like a relay. You get the button and pass it on to someone else in that chain to continue. Let's break the chain. Let's be part of that process and let us protect Uganda.



Source of the social distancing nfigraphics: <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/>