

COVID-19 and Sexual & Reproductive Health (SRH): Guidance for Women

(Updated on 20 November 2020)

The following Guidance is part of the AFOG's advocacy effort to inform our women of the knowledge currently available on this topic. It is not meant to be a clinical diagnostic service and you are advised to consult your own Healthcare Professional for any specific issues. This Guidance is not definitive as the situation may vary from one country or setting to another. As this pandemic evolves, we will keep this information updated at regular intervals. The information contained here relates to the AFOG Statements that can be accessed in the COVID-19 Corner for further information.

1. What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is the infectious disease caused by the coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, which mainly affects the lungs.

As of 20 November 2020, more than 55.6 million people worldwide have tested positive for the COVID-19 infection and 1.34 million people have unfortunately died.

COVID-19 affects different people in different ways. Most infected people will only develop mild to moderate illness and recover without hospitalisation.

2. What are the symptoms and signs of COVID-19?

Some people have no symptoms at all. Most will have mild symptoms as listed below:

Most common symptoms:

- Fever
- Dry cough
- Tiredness/ fatigue.

Other symptoms that are less common and may affect some patients include:

- Loss of taste or smell
- Nasal stuffiness/blockage
- Conjunctivitis (also known as "red eyes")
- Sore throat
- Headache
- Muscle or joint pain
- Different types of skin rash
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Chills or dizziness.

Symptoms of severe COVID-19 disease include:

- Shortness of breath
- Loss of appetite
- Confusion
- Persistent pain or pressure in the chest
- High fever (above 38°C / 100.4°F).

3. What is Domestic Abuse?

It is a pattern of behavior used to gain power and control over an intimate partner. It is sometimes also called Domestic Violence or Intimate Partner Violence but the abuse can extend beyond physical and sexual violence to emotional, psychological and economic abuse. Anyone can suffer Domestic Abuse but women are predominantly on the receiving end.

4. Is Domestic Abuse more frequent now?

It has been estimated that during this pandemic, Domestic Abuse has increased by about 20% worldwide. Lockdowns and movement restrictions have resulted in isolation, increased stress and anxiety, joblessness and financial instability, increase in alcohol consumption and reduced access to healthcare facilities and community support – all of which have contributed to this increase.

5. How can I protect myself from Domestic Abuse?

Nobody deserves to be in an abusive relationship and the first step towards protecting yourself is recognising the signs of abuse. There are many signs but the more common ones are listed below:

Does your partner

- grab, push or hit you?
- threaten you or the children with physical harm to get his way?
- constantly minimise your achievements?
- make you feel inadequate, worthless or powerless?
- prevent you from contacting your family or friends?

Do you

- feel scared of your partner?
- feel that you are always at fault?
- alter your behavior so as not to anger your partner?
- continue in the relationship out of fear?

If you feel that you are a victim of Domestic Abuse, then you should take the courageous move of first seeking help and support.

6. How do I get help / support during this pandemic?

If you think you are being abused, seek help. These tips provide guidance on how to find safety and support especially if you have difficulty accessing your healthcare provider as a result of restricted movement.

- Consider sharing your concerns with a trusted friend, family member, or neighbour. Work with them to develop a plan for when you need help. This plan may include, for instance, creating a secret code or multiple code words, sentences, or emojis that would help you communicate more safely with them.
- Develop an escape strategy, such as saying you need to go to the pharmacy or grocery store and, once there, asking to use the phone to call for help.
- If possible, keep a telephone always charged and accessible and know which numbers to call for help: a friend, a family member, or the police. If your life is in danger, call the police if you believe it is safe to do so.
- Try to identify patterns in your partner's use and level of violence. This can help you to predict when abuse may escalate.
- You can talk with someone who has been trained to help by calling a local helpline.

If you need urgent medical attention, call an ambulance or the emergency medical services.

7. What should I do if I suspect that a friend is a victim?

- If you are worried about a friend's safety, stay in touch and be creative. Avoid making the abuser suspicious so that communication lines can stay open. You can create secret code words to use in conversations that can help you communicate more safely.
- Ask your friend how they prefer to connect. It is important to establish a safe communication channel (instant message or text over a call or a specific platform or app) since they will be, in many instances, physically close to the abuser who might be monitoring conversations.
- Be supportive and believe them. Reassure them that they are not alone and that help and support are available. Recognise that it may be difficult for them to talk about the abuse. If they want to talk, listen carefully and be empathetic.
- Help them think through how to stay safe during COVID-19. Help your friend create a plan for lockdown situations. Are there other friends or family they could stay with during this time? Consider helping them to reach out to these people to make a plan.
- Respect their right to consent. Unless you strongly believe that your friend's life is in danger, avoid taking actions without their consent. They know the

- safety risks best, and, therefore, they should be driving any decisions related to the abuse they are experiencing.
- Respect their privacy. Because of safety issues, stigma, feelings of shame, and victim-blaming that survivors often face, it is critical that their experiences and identity remain confidential, unless they give explicit consent to reveal them.
 - Offer practical assistance and share resources. Let your friend know that you want to help. If you are able, offer them a safe place to stay, transportation, or other forms of support that may increase their safety.
 - Let your friend know they can talk with someone who has been trained to help. Provide them with information about local services and helplines.

8. What precautions can I take to prevent a pregnancy?

Preventing an unplanned pregnancy is important and all modern contraceptive methods are safe to use during the COVID-19 pandemic. During lockdowns, services at your usual GP or Family Planning Clinic may be reduced especially with regard to face to face appointments. Depending on your location, you may however be able to access these healthcare services by phone or on-line.

If you are unable to access these healthcare services and especially if you have an underlying medical condition like diabetes, high blood pressure or cancer, you may opt for a contraceptive that does not require medical supervision such as condoms, spermicides or “morning after” pills. These can be obtained fairly easily at the local drug store.

9. Is it safe to go to the hospital/clinic for contraception?

Many women are concerned that going to the hospital/clinic will expose them to a greater risk of getting COVID-19. However, as movement restrictions are progressively eased, health facilities now have measures in place to reduce this risk such as wearing masks, ensuring safe distancing and reducing waiting and consultation times. In some regions, it may also be possible to consult with your healthcare provider by phone or video link.

10. What should I do if I have an unplanned pregnancy?

Call your primary care doctor or Obstetrician & Gynaecologist and make an appointment. It is important to see your doctor to figure out how far along your pregnancy is and plan your care and next steps. If you do not plan on keeping the baby, now is the time to consider an abortion if it is legal in your locality. Your healthcare professional will discuss the options available with you in a confidential and non-judgmental way

11. What should I do if I feel down or depressed?

Here are tips and advice that we hope you will find useful.

- Keep informed: Listen to advice and recommendations from your national and local authorities. Follow trusted news channels, such as local and national TV and radio, and keep up-to-date with the latest news from respected organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and Asia Oceania Federation of Obstetrics and Gynecology (AFOG).
- Have a routine: Keep up with daily routines as far as possible, or make new ones.
 - a. Get up and go to bed at similar times every day.
 - b. Keep up with personal hygiene.
 - c. Eat healthy meals at regular times.
 - d. Exercise regularly.
 - e. Allocate time for working and time for resting.
 - f. Make time for doing things you enjoy.
- Minimize newsfeeds: Try to reduce how much you watch, read or listen to news that makes you feel anxious or distressed. Seek the latest information at specific times of the day, once or twice a day if needed.
- Social contact is important: If your movements are restricted, keep in regular contact with people close to you by telephone and online channels.
- Alcohol and drug use: Limit the amount of alcohol you drink or don't drink alcohol at all. Don't start drinking alcohol if you have not drunk alcohol before. Avoid using alcohol and drugs as a way of dealing with fear, anxiety, boredom and social isolation.
- Screen time: Be aware of how much time you spend in front of a screen every day. Make sure that you take regular breaks from on-screen activities.
- Video games: While video games can be a way to relax, it can be tempting to spend much more time on them than usual when at home for long periods. Be sure to keep the right balance with off-line activities in your daily routine.
- Social media: Use your social media accounts to promote positive and hopeful stories. Correct misinformation wherever you see it.
- Help others: If you are able to, offer support to people in your community who may need it, such as helping them with food shopping.
- Support health workers: Take opportunities online or through your community to thank your country's health-care workers and all those working to respond to COVID-19.
- Prior treatment for a mental condition: Ensure that you continue to take medication as prescribed, and that you have a way of re-stocking your medication. If you are seeing a mental health specialist, find out how to continue with that support during the outbreak. Keep in touch with people who care for you and know who you can contact for support if your mental health declines.

12. How can I protect myself from COVID-19?

You can help protect yourself from COVID-19 by:

- Hand hygiene: Washing your hands frequently with an alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water.
- Social distancing: Maintaining at least a 1-meter distance between yourself and others and avoiding crowded spaces.
- Wearing a mask and avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Practicing respiratory hygiene: Covering your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze; then dispose of the used tissue immediately.
- Maintaining a healthy diet and taking your supplements including Vitamin D.

13. Is there a vaccine yet?

Not yet, although many potential vaccines for COVID-19 are being studied. A few vaccines under study have shown very promising results but it will be several months before it is available for routine use.
