



Getting through a COVID-19 infection

A few thoughts and experiences, by Mehboob Ali Cassim (B.Pharm, MPS)

Note: Mehboob put his experience in writing to share with the patients who come to his pharmacy. Thank you, Mehboob, for sharing it with us too.

Let us begin at the beginning – this virus is real. It does not matter, at this point, whether you blame the east or the west, whether the virus is a natural one or manufactured in a lab.

The COVID-19 virus is real, it is here, and it can be lethal.

Secondly, we know that, well, we don't know much...

We don't know when we will get symptoms, if we will have symptoms, or even which symptoms we may get, or how long these symptoms may last. In our home, we have had 6 adults with various symptoms, yet we all picked up the virus at about the same time.

- Two had severe shortness of breath and were on oxygen therapy.
- Two had severe pain requiring high schedule pain killers, with severe fever and night sweats, once these symptoms settled these 2 adults also had shortness of breath and extreme fatigue.
- The last 2 adults had some mild stomach symptoms for 3 days, and that was the end of their COVID-19 experience.

So actually, there is no single clinical picture of what a COVID-19 patient looks like. Add to this any existing comorbidities such as diabetes, hypertension, obesity, asthma etc and the picture becomes even more of a blur. What we do know, is that most infected persons will have mild symptoms, and this will give some hope.

I have advised my patients that this pandemic will be a good time for them to get to know their pharmacist and local GP – their advice and guidance will keep them sane, and give them comfort that they are not alone through this. Patients should keep their numbers handy, build relationships, and make sure that the pharmacist and GP know the patient's important medical history, so that they may plan the treatment protocol appropriately. Patients will feel overwhelmed with a variety of symptoms, often of just information overload from friends



Mehboob Cassim

and family. They need to take a step back, tell themselves they will get through this, and start the process of actively getting through the 14 days of self-isolation.

The first shock is the positive test result. It feels like someone pointing a gun at you, waiting to pull the trigger. Remember, most people will have mild symptoms, you must keep mentally strong from this point on, you will need to push yourself through this. Do not give up!

The next important thing for me was how I could protect the rest of my family that were not positive, including the elderly. The first prize is to self-isolate if you can, away from other non-infected family members. It will ensure that you are not responsible for causing any serious illness to those around you. If this is not possible, a very strict protocol will have to be followed. All the people showing symptoms must be isolated from those with no symptoms – this is the bottom line, and there should be strict distancing and hygiene protocols until symptoms have subsided, for at least 14 days.

Processes such as how to disinfect plates, tables, clothes and so on are extremely important in households to prevent spread of this virus. We would have our meals placed outside our room, have the meal and then place used utensils into a diluted bleach solution to disinfect, before the plates went back to our kitchen. Even better, you could use disposable plates and discard them appropriately after each meal. If you have had close contact with anyone outside of your household, it is imperative that you inform these people if you test positive for the COVID-19 virus, so that they may take appropriate steps to protect themselves and their families.

Remember you cannot leave your place of isolation. We ordered all groceries, fruits, vegetables and other items online. We are lucky in South Africa that these services work well. On the app that we used, we would order at 7 am and receive the delivery by lunch time. There is no harm in a family member or friend dropping off a meal for you, as long you continue to maintain the isolation protocols. We asked our family members to leave the box at the gate, and get back into their cars, before we came out of the house to fetch the box. Remember, you don't want to make anyone else ill. We did not allow them to even press the bell button – they would hoot or call us when they were outside. As far as medications and vitamins go, our independent pharmacies deliver medicines regularly, and have been offering this service for years, so this was one less thing to worry about.

You may experience any one or number of symptoms relating to COVID-19, there is no minimum or maximum. For this reason, it is of utmost importance to keep your healthcare provider in the loop – as your symptoms change, there may be medications you may need which will require a prescription from your GP. It is again important that your pharmacist and GP know who you are, so they may facilitate the delivery of your medication to your home, as you may not move around. Continue to follow strict hand hygiene and social distancing as well wearing a mask – you do not want to spread this virus to a family member or care giver. Protect yourself and those around you. From my understanding days 3 to 8 are the most contagious, while day 8 to 10 can be the most dangerous, when most hospitalisations occur.

As a pharmacist, I followed an immune-boosting regimen since the beginning of the lockdown, and increased the dosages during infection. We advise patients to check with their pharmacist and/or GP before starting any regimen, as some medications may alter blood pressure and blood sugar levels, including vitamins.

My daily immune boosting regimen since the beginning of the lockdown has been vitamins containing the following;

Vitamin C, minimum 1 000 mg daily¹⁻³

Zinplex, 1 tablet daily⁴⁻⁶

Black seed oil, 2 capsules daily¹²

Honey, 1 tsp in the evening with some warm water

1 Aspirin (100–150 mg) daily

Vitamin D, 1 000 iu⁷⁻⁹

I also found that breathing exercises (e.g. blowing up a balloon and box breathing) were very useful.

When experiencing symptoms, some products may provide relief in these dosages, as they contain the active ingredients required to fight the symptoms of the COVID-19 virus. Remember in the first few days, the virus will be in the throat and nasal passages, effective rinsing of the throat, by gargling, and nasal passages, with saline solutions for nasal irrigation, will assist in preventing the virus spreading into the lungs, causing more serious issues.

I am hesitant to quote a day by day experience as each person's symptoms will be different, it is important to note that you **MUST** keep your healthcare provider informed of any and all changes in your condition as the symptoms may change suddenly. In my case I was also on an antibiotic, Azithromycin 500 mg,^{10,11} once daily for three days, as well as some high dose steroids¹⁰⁻¹² to keep my airways open. I also had to be on oxygen therapy for a few days. My wife had such severe pain, that we had to get high schedule pain medicines¹³ before the pain began to subside. Patients should not try to get through this infection alone.

The first line pain therapy is paracetamol, something stronger may be needed. Cough syrups¹² and lozenges also provide symptomatic relief as needed, any brand or flavour you prefer, there is no magic bullet, take what normally helps you with the same symptoms. You may also want to keep your favourite decongestant nasal spray at home, as there will

be some nasal congestion at some phase during the infection. Steam inhalation^{13,14} with Vicks or eucalyptus/Olbac oil works well too.

Know your numbers – If possible, the following should be monitored at home and reported to the pharmacist/GP:

- **Respiratory rate** (number of breaths per minute)

One complete breath comprises one inhalation, when the chest rises, followed by one exhalation, when the chest falls. To measure the respiratory rate, count the number of breaths for an entire minute or count for 30 seconds and multiply that number by two.

- **SpO2 levels** (Using a finger pulse oximeter)

SpO2, also known as oxygen saturation, is a measure of the amount of oxygen-carrying haemoglobin in the blood relative to the amount of haemoglobin not carrying oxygen. The body needs there to be a certain level of oxygen in the blood or it will not function as efficiently. This number needs to be above 92%.

- **Temperature**

Monitor for fever using a temperature thermometer and report any abnormal readings to the healthcare provider.

- **Chronic conditions**

Monitor all chronic conditions even more closely. Regularly check blood glucose and blood pressure measurements, and keep the healthcare providers updated with the results.

Post infection – For me this was the most difficult, it is hard to explain, but your body takes a real beating when fighting off this virus. It is imperative that you focus some time and effort on the post infection recovery. The role of rehydration alone is understated – due to the excessive fever and sweating, your body will lose vital salts such as magnesium, potassium and sodium. I used simple salt tabs to get the balance back up, and got immediate relief from the leg cramps. The fatigue gradually reduced as well. You may need to take any good multivitamin and even a protein shake if necessary. Do not underestimate the role of good overall nutrition in your recovery. Listen to your body, and give it what it needs to get back to normal. There have been cases of reduction in lean body mass of COVID-19 patients, so once again, check with your healthcare provider to make sure that you are well on the way to recovery. Finally, this virus will test your patience, mentally and physically. Be patient, pray and push ahead with positivity. You will make it through this.

You are not alone.

Disclaimer: The information in this article is simply based on personal experience, and has been scientifically referenced; it is not a cure for the COVID-19 virus infection.

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An interesting Facebook post

Lorraine Osman

The pandemic has been plagued (excuse me) by fake news and misinformation. Much of this has surfaced on social media, with many terrifying posts going viral, only to be later discovered to be completely untrustworthy.

There was one recent post that totally resonated with me. The author is someone who is a complete stranger to me. All I know is that her name is Amy Wright. Her words however will resonate with all of us – so many people are becoming blasé about social distancing, wearing masks and engaging in safe behaviour. I join her in asking the question, “How dare you?”

She also pointed out some interesting facts about other viral infections. It's so important to realise that other viruses can also have long lasting effects, and above all, that this one is not just any other old virus – this one is complex, with multiple manifestations, and needs to be treated carefully and with respect.

This is an extract of what Amy Wright posted on Facebook. I thank her (in her absence) for sharing her perspective.

“Chickenpox is a virus. Lots of people have had it, and probably don't think about it much once the initial illness has passed. But it stays in your body and lives there forever, and maybe when you're older, you have debilitatingly painful outbreaks of shingles. You don't just get over this virus in a few weeks, never to have another health effect. We know this because it's been around for years, and has been studied medically for years.

Herpes is also a virus. And once someone has it, it stays in your body and lives there forever, and anytime they get a little run down or stressed-out they're going to have an outbreak. Maybe every time you have a big event coming up (school pictures, job interview, big date) you're going to get a cold sore. For the rest of your life. You don't just get over it in a few weeks. We know this because it's been around for years, and been studied medically for years.

HIV is a virus. It attacks the immune system and makes the carrier far more

vulnerable to other illnesses. It has a list of symptoms and negative health impacts that goes on and on. It was decades before viable treatments were developed that allowed people to live with a reasonable quality of life. Once you have it, it lives in your body forever and there is no cure. Over time, that takes a toll on the body, putting people living with HIV at greater risk for health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, kidney disease, diabetes, bone disease, liver disease, cognitive disorders, and some types of cancer. We know this because it has been around for years, and had been studied medically for years.

Now with COVID-19, we have a novel virus that spreads rapidly and easily. The full spectrum of symptoms and health effects is only just beginning to be catalogued, much less understood. So far the symptoms may include:

*Fever
Fatigue
Coughing
Pneumonia
Chills/Trembling
Acute respiratory distress
Lung damage (potentially permanent)
Loss of taste (a neurological symptom)
Sore throat
Headaches
Difficulty breathing
Mental confusion
Diarrhoea
Nausea or vomiting
Loss of appetite
Strokes have also been reported in some people who have COVID-19 (even in the relatively young)
Swollen eyes
Blood clots
Seizures
Liver damage*

Kidney damage

Rash

COVID toes

People testing positive for COVID-19 have been documented to be sick even after 60 days. Many people are sick for weeks, get better, and then experience a rapid and sudden flare up and get sick all over again. A man in Seattle was hospitalised for 62 days, and while well enough to be released, still has a long road of recovery ahead of him. Not to mention a \$1.1 million medical bill.

Then there is MIS-C. Multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children is a condition where different body parts can become inflamed, including the heart, lungs, kidneys, brain, skin, eyes, or gastrointestinal organs. Children with MIS-C may have a fever and various symptoms, including abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhoea, neck pain, rash, bloodshot eyes, or feeling extra tired. While rare, it has caused deaths.

*This disease has not been around for years. It has basically been 6 months. No one knows yet the long-term health effects, or how it may present itself years down the road for people who have been exposed. We literally *do not know* what we do not know.*

For those in our society who suggest that people being cautious are cowards, for people who refuse to take even the simplest of precautions to protect themselves and those around them, I want to ask, without hyperbole and in all sincerity: How dare you?

How dare you risk the lives of others so cavalierly? How dare you decide for others that they should welcome exposure as "getting it over with,"

when literally no one knows who will be the lucky "mild symptoms" case, and who may fall ill and die? Because while we know that some people are more susceptible to suffering a more serious case, we also know that 20 and 30-year-olds have died, marathon runners and fitness nuts have died, children and infants have died.

How dare you behave as though you know more than medical experts, when those same experts acknowledge that there is so much we don't yet know, but with what we DO know, are smart enough to be scared of how easily this is spread, and recommend baseline precautions such as:

Frequent hand-washing

Physical distancing

Reduced social/public contact or interaction

Mask wearing

Covering your cough or sneeze

Avoiding touching your face

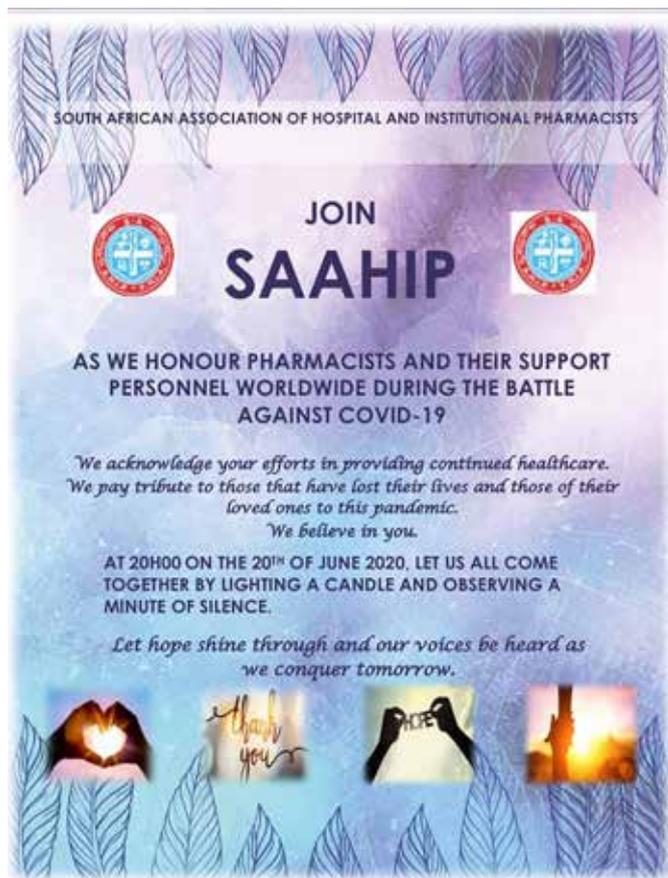
Sanitising frequently touched surfaces

The more things we can all do to mitigate our risk of exposure, the better off we all are, in my opinion. Not only does it flatten the curve and allow health care providers to maintain levels of service that aren't immediately and catastrophically overwhelmed; it also reduces unnecessary suffering and deaths, and buys time for the scientific community to study the virus in order to come to a more full understanding of the breadth of its impacts in both the short and long term.

I reject the notion that it's "just a virus" and we'll all get it eventually. What a careless, lazy, heartless stance."

SAAHIP's KwaZulu-Natal branch react to the pandemic

Recently, two creative SAAHIP members produced posters for use by pharmacists.



Kaajal Chetty, vice president of SAAHIP, designed a poster to invite pharmacists to take time to honour pharmacists and pharmacy support personnel, and to acknowledge their work. Pharmacists paid tribute to those who have lost their lives in the pandemic, and those who have lost loved ones.



Saunal Khoosal recognised the need of pharmacists to take care of their mental health during this stressful time. She advised them that they also need some TLC and designed this poster to provide a prescription for what they needed at the end of a difficult day.