

#Covid-19, HIV and TB

HIV-positive people and those with tuberculosis who are not on treatment will be at higher risk of worse outcomes if they contract the coronavirus, says Professor Ian Sanne, CEO of Right to Care and an internationally renowned infectious diseases specialist.



Ian Sanne

“South Africa has a high rate of people who are HIV-positive and many citizens who suffer from tuberculosis. We are concerned because we do not know how they will respond if they contract Covid-19. There haven’t been sufficient cases of HIV-positive or tuberculosis patients who contracted the virus to determine exactly what the risk is and how they will respond,” he says.

Serious risk if low CD4 count

Sanne stressed how much more important it is now to test for your HIV status and begin treatment as soon as possible if necessary. “People who are HIV positive and on antiretroviral treatment most likely face much less risk. However, patients who are HIV positive and who are not on treatment, with low CD4 counts, will be at increased risk. Now is the time to know your status and start treatment.”

Patients who suffer from an existing lung disease such as TB are also at high risk particularly those who are undiagnosed or not taking medication. Tuberculosis sufferers who are on treatment also have lower risk, but they still have to be very careful and should avoid public places, wear masks and wash hands.

“Hand washing is the most important way to diminish the risk of contracting Covid-19, because the virus remains on surfaces that you touch. Another risk is when people cough into their hands before they shake hands with you. You may then touch your mouth and transmit the virus,” Sanne explains.

Vaccine

“The South African authorities are working on ensuring that as soon as there is a vaccine available that this will be passed through our regulatory process speedily. There are 10 well-established teams worldwide working on a vaccine and I anticipate a vaccine within weeks.”

Public sector readiness

Sanne believes the public health sector is ready to deal with Covid-19. “Since the Ebola outbreak, the Department of Health has established an emergency operating centre at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) and there is lots of coordination underway. Right to Care is part of that support and we are having almost daily discussions around how to be prepared.”

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