

Difäm
German Institute for Medical Mission
Podcast on Corona Virus and HIV
As of September 2021

Hello and good afternoon to everybody to this new podcast on COVID-19 from the Difäm health community. My name is Ute Papkalla and I am here with my colleague, Carina Dinkel, we are both members of the Difäm health team.

We recently talked about the effects of COVID 19 and HIV and have seen that PLWHA are more likely to get seriously ill and even die when they are infected with COVID 19. Therefore, the question arises, how PLWHA can stay safe and how we organise our services for PLWHA in the midst of the Corona pandemic.

This is an important question and the first thing we need to keep in mind is the fact that PLWHA are more vulnerable to COVID 19. Therefore, we must ensure that all our clinics - be it treatment centres for ART, counselling and testing centres or others - are organised in a way that they do not put people at risk. Of course, it will be best if you and your patients are vaccinated. However, as we speak, there are many who do not have access to a vaccine yet. Therefore, the preventive measures that we put in place are very important.

Make sure that you control the entrance to those clinics and that everyone who comes in washes their hands at the entrance and wears a mask. Also all staff working in a treatment or testing centre must wear a mask at all times and wash their hands frequently.

Arrange your treatment or counselling rooms in a way that you can keep a distance of 1,5 m between health care provider and patient – best put a table between you and your patient. That will ensure that providers and patients are safe.

Washing your hands frequently, wearing a mask and ventilating your counselling or treatment rooms frequently are the absolute essentials.

Once you have to examine your patient, it is not possible to keep your distance. Therefore, you must wear a simple gown, a mask and a face shield to protect yourself. You wash your hands before the examination and wear gloves. In pandemic times, this will keep you and your patient safe.

So do people working in the treatment centre have to wear full PPE at all times?

This is not necessary, except in a situation where you possibly get in touch with body fluids and cannot keep the necessary distance. As I said, only when you examine patients, when you have to take blood or do swabs, is your PPE necessary. However, what you must do after every patient is remove your gloves, wash your hands and then be ready for the next patient.

However, that means they have to change frequently, right? So where and how to do that?

You should arrange your clinic or testing centre in a way that you put on your gown and protective gear before you enter the treatment room and have another protected area where you take off your protective gear after you have finished with your patients. We call these doffing and donning areas and they should be identified and prepared in advance.

In case you know that you are going to examine the patient in the course of the visit, you put on PPE before you enter the consultancy room or patient's room. Do your counselling and testing and in the end, after the patient leaves you take your PPE off. Make sure that you take it off correctly without contaminating yourself. If possible, and accepted by the patient, the talking can be done by one person and the examination and sample taking by another person, even in different rooms. So one person must only wear a mask and the other full PPE and this person can also stay in PPE and only has to change gloves and wash and disinfect hands after every patient.

[Wait, does this mean, when I do only counselling, I do not have to wear full protective gear or even should not wear full PPE?](#)

The counselling process needs trust, confidentiality and the possibility for active listening. A face shield, a gown and gloves build up barriers. Therefore, it is safe if you just sit apart, do not shake hands and wear your mask. In that manner, you can ensure that a good and safe environment is there for counselling. For a confidential conversation, the mask and the distance is enough.

It seems that HIV counselling and testing services were greatly reduced during the Corona pandemic. This is understandable because people did not want to go out and put themselves at risk. However, we also must recognise that HIV is a much greater risk for your health. Therefore, we should do all we can to invite people to come back for counselling and testing and to do this in a safe environment.

[Do you have any additional suggestions, how we can organise our counselling and treatment sessions so that we keep the patients and ourselves safe?](#)

You can ensure that there are not too many people coming to the clinic at once. We understand that people like to meet each other while waiting for their appointment. But in times like this, our waiting areas should be kept safe, meaning that they have hand washing facilities for everyone; block every second seat so that there are at least 1,5 m between people and ensure that the areas are well ventilated. The good old palaver hut may be a good option or a shed that is in the open and has enough space to let people wait apart. Outside waiting areas on verandas for example are also preferable to inside waiting areas.

Also in this digital age, it may be good if you let people get appointment slots in advance and you can send them a reminder via SMS so that they will not forget their time slot. This will make it easier for staff and patients.

[As we have our patients here anyway for testing and we know, that people living with HIV/AIDS have an increased risk of severe COVID, does it make sense to test for HIV and COVID at the same time?](#)

Actually even though both are viral diseases, they are very different when it comes to testing and diagnosis. We diagnose HIV by finding out whether someone has antibodies against HIV 1 and/or HIV 2 in their blood. Therefore, we need a safe environment to do these tests and it is necessary that everyone who takes blood and does the test will use PPE.

Tests for COVID 19 are not done with blood, but must be done by a nasal or nasopharyngeal swab.

The problem is that the COVID tests are often not easily available. So it makes sense to reserve these tests for patients who have any signs or symptoms of COVID-19 or who have been in close contact with someone who is suffering from COVID-19. In many ways these are not the people we usually see in our HIV clinics. On the contrary: We even would advise people who have acute symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 NOT to come to the HIV clinic, in order not to put anyone at risk. Therefore, the HIV clinic and our counselling and testing centres should be kept for people who have no acute signs and symptoms of COVID-19.

Okay, so let me wrap that up again:

Counselling and testing services as well as HIV clinics should be kept open and running in any case. But in order to protect staff and patients certain measures should be put in place:

- Waiting areas should be well ventilated or outside and accumulation of several patients should be avoided. The waiting areas should be equipped with hand washing facilities and everybody should wear a mask.
- People that feel ill showing symptoms suggestive of COVID should not come to the HIV clinic but be tested for COVID at a designated testing facility.
- The rooms for counselling should be well ventilated. For the counselling process, distance should be kept and masks should be worn by everybody.
- For examinations or sample taking, full PPE must be donned. Designated donning and doffing areas should be identified. In addition, it is best to have separate rooms for counselling and the more invasive tasks.

Yes, this sounds good, and do not forget the frequent handwashing and disinfection, as well as changing gloves after every patient if you wear them.

Let's work together to keep our patients and ourselves safe and to keep the services up. And do not forget the normal preventive measures in daily life: keep the distance, wear a mask, wash your hands and tell your patients to do the same!

Yes, and let's not forget: get vaccinated if you have the chance to!

Stay safe and stay blessed!