

Risk communication and community engagement readiness and initial response for novel coronaviruses (nCoV)

Interim guidance
10 January 2020



This document provides WHO checklists for risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) readiness and initial response for novel coronaviruses (nCoV) recently identified in Wuhan, China (2019-nCoV). The objective of this document is to provide actionable guidance for countries to implement effective RCCE strategies which will help protect the public's health in the early response to nCoV. This document includes recommended RCCE goals and actions for countries preparing for nCoV cases and for countries that have confirmed nCoV cases.

WHO will update these recommendations as new information becomes available on the situation in Wuhan, China. This interim guidance was adapted from WHO's RCCE guidance and training materials.

Why is it important to include RCCE as part of a national public health emergency response?

Every public health emergency faces new communication challenges and lessons learned. These challenges can lead to a range of outcomes including loss of trust, reputation, economy and at worst case – lives. While there are always new lessons to be learned, there are actions we know will work. This is a call to leaders to ensure RCCE is an essential role in your health emergency preparedness and response for the following reasons.

One of the most important and effective interventions in public health response to any event is to proactively communicate what is known, what is unknown and what is being done to get more information with the objective of saving lives and minimizing adverse consequences.

RCCE helps prevent infodemics (the spread of misinformation), builds trust in the response and increases the probability that health advice is followed. It minimizes and manages false rumours and misunderstanding that undermine response and may lead to further disease spread.

Proactive communication and engagement with the public and at risk populations on a consistent basis can help alleviate confusion and misunderstanding.

People have the right to be informed and understand the health risks they face, in addition to that of their loved ones.

The perception of risk among affected populations often differs from that of experts and authorities. Effective RCCE can help bridge that gap by determining what people know, feel and do related to disease outbreaks, as well as what they ought to know and do to bring the outbreak under control. Effective RCCE helps transform and deliver complex scientific knowledge which is understood by, accessible to, and trusted by populations and communities.

Effective RCCE uses community engagement strategies to involve communities in the response and develops acceptable yet effective interventions to stop further amplification of the outbreak and for individual and group protective measures.

RCCE is essential for surveillance, case reporting, contact tracing, caring for the sick and clinical care, gathering local support for any logistic and operational needs of the response.

RCCE readiness checklist for countries preparing for a possible outbreak

Goals

- Prepare to communicate with unknown information and uncertainty
- Assess national and subnational communication capacity (persons and resources)
- Identify the main actors, and form partnerships
- Plan for activation and implementation of RCCE plan
- Train emergency RCCE staff and potential surge staff on plans and procedures

Action steps

Risk Communication Systems

- Ensure that highest levels of government agree to include RCCE in preparedness and response activities and is ready to release information to protect the public's health rapidly, transparently and accessibly
- Review existing RCCE plan and consider adjustments for a respiratory outbreak
- Agree on procedures for timely release of information such as clearance procedures for messages and information products – keep clearance chains short
- Prepare a budget for communication (including scale-up)
- Set up a RCCE team and define roles and responsibilities

Internal and partner coordination

- Identify partners to include other agencies, organizations, community planners, health care workers, etc., with their contact information (in the case of this outbreak consider Ministry of Agriculture, Travel and Tourism, hospital systems, etc.) – should an outbreak occur, these partners should be activated into a multi-sectoral RCCE response team
- Assess the communication capacity of all relevant partners – identify typical target audiences and channels of communication used by partners
- Plan and agree on communication roles and responsibilities through standard operating procedures (SOPs) (e.g. which agency speaks first on which issue, what specific topics and audiences will be best addressed through which agency/partner, how will messaging be aligned)

Public communication

- Review the roster of spokespeople at all levels, listing their expertise in anticipated public health threats, and, if necessary, train them
- Produce and pre-test message templates
- Identify key media; create and update a list of journalists, and foster media relations
- Identify media and other communication channels and influencers and assess their potential reach for potential target audiences – use channels and influencers trusted, preferred and regularly used by target audiences

Communication engagement with affected communities

- Establish methods for understanding the concerns, attitudes and beliefs of key audiences
- Identify target audiences, and gather information on their knowledge and behaviours (e.g. who they trust, how they are likely to receive information, their daily habits, their concerns, etc.)
- Identify existing community influencers (e.g. community leaders, religious leaders, health workers, traditional healers, etc.) and networks (e.g. women's groups, community health volunteers, unions, social mobilizers for polio, malaria, HIV) that can be repurposed for community engagement

Addressing uncertainty, perceptions and misinformation management

- Prepare to begin communicating before the full picture is known by ensuring leaders agree to communicate with
- Establish a system for monitoring and, if necessary, responding to rumours, misinformation and frequently asked questions

Capacity building

- Consider training needed for RCCE responders on what is known and unknown about novel coronavirus, current plans and procedures as well as sub-national preparation for RCCE response

RCCE initial response checklist for countries where one or more cases have been identified

Goals

- Adapt and apply action steps from readiness checklist above if not already completed
- Establish, build and/or maintain trust with population through regular two way communication and engagement that regularly addresses misunderstanding, misinformation, rumours and frequently asked questions
- Encourage people to adopt protective behaviours
- Manage expectations and communicate uncertainties
- Coordinate and encourage collaboration among response partners
- Assess initial risk perception of affected and at risk populations
- Provide information and guidance

Action steps

Risk Communication Systems

- Adapt existing RCCE plan to the response, and activate the RCCE response team and plan
- Identify and activate spokespeople for the emergency
- Draw up timelines for communication activities and products
- Monitor RCCE response by identifying processes that delay information release and create confusion among affected populations

Internal and partner coordination

- Activate SOPs for RCCE coordination with other response agencies and partners
- Link national, regional and local RCCE operations
- Assign responsibilities for internal (to each response agency) and external (to the public) communication
- Coordinate message preparation, consistency and dissemination

Public communication

- Announce the health threat early and often and update after a risk assessment and an analysis of risk perception
- Provide information as soon as it is received, even if it is not complete and openly explain the degree to which information is uncertain (manage uncertainty), provide the public regular channels to get updated information (e.g. hotlines, website, etc.)
- Use trusted and effective communication channels that target audiences regularly use
- Identify and activate trusted influencers for the audiences

Communication engagement with affected communities

- Conduct a rapid risk perception analysis based on existing formal and informal information
- Segment the audiences for the communication response (e.g. affected people, health care workers, political leaders, donors, etc.)
- Translate materials into relevant languages and adapt to literacy levels

Addressing uncertainty, perceptions and misinformation management

- Communicate what is known and what is not known - explain degree to which uncertainty still exists
- Activate rumour monitoring, verification and response mechanisms
- Monitor mass and social media, hotlines, health care worker feedback from patients and community concerns and continually apply feedback into adapted RCCE strategy

Capacity building

- Plan regular updated guidance to all RCCE responders
- Train surge staff
- Consider training leaders, responders and spokespeople on RCCE guidance as needed

This document is an earlier version of a WHO information product or publication which was subsequently replaced by an updated version. WHO is archiving this earlier version in its institutional repository, retroactively, for reference and archival purposes. The current version of all WHO information products and publications is authoritative.

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