



PREPARING COMMUNITY PHARMACIES FOR THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Background

This guidance document is part of FAPA's response to an outbreak of respiratory disease called "coronavirus disease 2019" (COVID-19), which is caused by a novel (new) coronavirus now officially called "SARS-CoV-2". COVID-19 is now affecting more than 100 countries and was [publicly characterized as a pandemic by the World Health Organization \(WHO\) on March 11, 2020.](#)

As more countries experience a rise in the number of cases and possible community transmission, governments and various sectors are expected to take measures to slow down the spread of the disease to a level that does not overwhelm each country's health system. This is a prime opportunity for pharmacists to take action and show how we can help in strengthening each country's existing health system by:

1. Alleviating the fear and reducing panic through public health education
2. Preventing the spread of infection in the community and in the workforce
3. Providing direction for patients to access the health care services that they need
4. Ensuring availability of essential medicines and supply by preventing panic buying and rational use of medicines.

STEPS TO PREPARE YOUR PHARMACY TEAM

The following is a list of recommendations that community pharmacy managers, owners and staff may take in order to prepare for the impact of COVID-19.

1. Stay informed and up-to-date about the local COVID-19 situation

Have a list and check the official websites, applications, or text messages daily from your national and local governments to monitor the real time situation and anticipate the needs in your area. Do not share unverified information and check your teams news sources if they are reliable and accurate.

2. Prepare your staff for emergency situations

A COVID-19 outbreak in your community may lead to staff absenteeism. Prepare alternative staffing plans to ensure as many of your pharmacy's staff are available to serve patients as possible. One option is to implement grouping of staff, with members of the same group always working in the same shift while there is an ongoing outbreak in order to prevent exposure of all the pharmacy staff to any employee who may have been infected. Have a protocol for what to do when encountering suspected and confirmed COVID-19 cases among patients and staff within the pharmacy.

3. Establish relationships with key healthcare and public health partners in your community

Make sure you know about the healthcare and public health emergency planning and response activities in your locality and community. Look for alternative suppliers and form relationships with other pharmacies in case of shortages in essential medicines and supplies or inability to provide services.

4. Make a continuously updated emergency contacts list available

List and update as needed the contact numbers of all possible referral facilities within and near your community and learn about managing and transferring of patients who may come to or ask your pharmacy. Also have a list of all suppliers and other partner establishments to ensure continuity of service for patients. Have the necessary contact information readily shared with patients who may need it.

5. Make daily updates and checks with your team

Share information about what is currently known about COVID-19, the potential for surge and your pharmacy's plan and approach to the changes that need to be made to all members of

your staff. Ask them how they are coping and any challenges they are facing given the interventions being done. Address the issues as soon as possible and provide emotional support to each other.

6. Protect your patients and your staff from COVID-19

It is imperative that the pharmacy does not contribute to the transmission of COVID-19 within the community and is able to provide continued service by having a healthy and able workforce. Steps should be taken to help identify possible cases among patients and staff without adding to the stigma, and implement appropriate measures to prevent the spread of infection.

7. Manage patient expectations and provide education

Manage expectations by informing patients about any changes in your pharmacy's policies, additional precautions, telephone-based patient care services, and availability of services and supplies. Make signages and instructions clear and visible in order to avoid confusion. Consider using your facility's website or social media pages to share updates.

Expect Different Reactions from Different Patients

During this time, many patients will first seek their medicines from community pharmacies increasing the strain on the workforce and pharmacy resources while also increasing the risk of acquiring COVID-19 for everyone working in or accessing the pharmacy. When interacting with patients during this situation, it is understandable that emotions may run high, therefore, it is important to remind your team to take a calm and objective approach when educating patients while considering varying health-seeking behaviors and attitudes of patients, such as, but not limited to:

1. Patients who are worried that they have COVID-19 and have a tendency to seek healthcare services more than what is necessary, misuse related medicines and stock-up on supplies;
2. Patients who underestimate the risks and therefore ignore the necessary precautions to prevent the transmission or may be unaware about the signs and symptoms that they may have, as well as necessary actions needed.
3. Patients who may be mistrustful of the healthcare system and health professionals, may avoid seeking the necessary healthcare and have a tendency to believe and spread information about unproven remedies and other alternative treatments.

4. Patients who may be concerned about their health but may have low health literacy due to limited access to reliable health information.

Remember that community pharmacy personnel are a good source of medicines, information and care as long as it is delivered with enough empathy and understanding in order to be accepted by the different kinds of patients that you may encounter.

INFECTION PREVENTION AND CONTROL FOR COMMUNITY PHARMACIES

COVID-19 is transmitted when the virus found in respiratory secretions is spread via contact, or via droplets generated by infected persons who sneeze or cough and fall on surfaces that come into contact with a healthy person's mucous membranes (ie. eyes, nose, mouth). It is important to note that the transmission of the virus within the pharmacy may occur from patient to health workers, health workers to patients, between health workers, and between patients. In addition to wearing the right kind of personal protective equipment (PPE) there are several modifications that may be made to the environment and work processes to reduce the risk of transmission.

1. Encourage sick employees to stay home

Check the temperature of your staff daily. Personnel who develop respiratory symptoms should be instructed not to report to work. Ensure that your sick leave policies are flexible and consistent with public health guidance and that employees are aware of these policies.

2. Prevent spread from the source

Before entering the pharmacy, screen patients and staff for symptoms of acute respiratory illness (fever, cough, difficulty of breathing). Offer masks that may be used to cover the mouth and nose of patients manifesting respiratory symptoms or disposable tissue for use when coughing or sneezing immediately followed by hand sanitation. Post visible signages teaching respiratory hygiene/ cough etiquette.

3. Practice social distancing

If possible, ask patients with symptoms to use telephone-based pharmacy services to consult and ask other relatives/ friends to purchase on their behalf from the pharmacy. Designate a separate well-ventilated space as a receiving/ waiting area for patients with visible respiratory symptoms, have had exposure to known cases or had

travelled or lived in areas with local transmission (presence of confirmed cases with no known source) so that they do not have to wait with other patients visiting your pharmacy. For all patients and staff, maintain a distance of at least 1 meter from each other.

4. Actively promote hand hygiene

Ensure your pharmacy has a supply of water and soap to be used for washing hands (for a duration of at least 20 seconds) before and after contact with patients, after contact with potentially contaminated materials, and before and after wearing personal protective equipment (eg. masks, gloves). Alcohol-based hand rubs should also be provided for patients. Be conscious and avoid touching your face, nose and mouth especially when you have touched a surface which may have been exposed to respiratory droplets (eg. countertops, door handles, packages, money, etc.). Use gloves when you need to touch the patient, prepare/ compound products, or handle any potentially contaminated material.

5. Provide no-touch receptacles for disposal and handle waste properly

Provide no-touch receptacles (eg. foot-pedal-operated lid or open, plastic-lined waste basket) for disposal of tissue that may be contaminated by respiratory secretions. Those that will handle this should wear gloves to tie the plastic lining and sealed in a second plastic bag. The contents are considered clinical waste which must be disposed correctly.

6. Disinfect surfaces regularly

Frequently disinfect high-touch surfaces (door handles, buttons, tools, etc.) and surfaces that may be exposed to respiratory droplets (countertops, telephone, etc.) using chlorine based solutions (eg. diluted household bleach), alcohol solution (with at least 70% alcohol), or other appropriate disinfectant. Wear disposable gloves, or reusable gloves that are to be used exclusively for these surfaces. Ensure proper ventilation of your pharmacy especially after application of disinfectants.

7. Ensure proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE)

For pharmacy staff who are at risk of exposure or contact to possibly infected patients (eg. those performing screening at the entrance) especially in the event of local transmission or confirmed cases in their community, it is recommended to wear the appropriate PPE such as, mask, goggle, gown and gloves. These PPE should be properly worn, removed, disposed or disinfected, mindful that these could be possibly

contaminated with every use. Conduct an inventory of PPE and strategize with your team to optimize the use or purchase additional PPE as needed.

MANAGING PHARMACEUTICAL SUPPLY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

The ongoing pandemic has disrupted production of essential medicines, medical supplies as well as raw materials and has a potential to put an increasing strain on the global pharmaceutical supply in the coming months. The following are some actions that you can take to help reduce the burden of possible drug shortages.

1. Have a list of alternative suppliers

To ensure continuity of your supply, look for alternative suppliers especially for products that are often running out or in demand. Update your list of alternative suppliers regularly.

2. Strictly enforce rational use of medicines

Some patients may purchase essential medicines out of fear or without seeing a doctor. Pharmacists should ensure that only those who need the medicines will be able to procure them.

3. Limit dispensing

Some patients may resort to panic buying or hoard products during these times. Limit dispensing to ensure that more people will still be able to buy their life-saving medicines from your pharmacy until the supplies are replenished.

4. Prepare a list of substitutes

For products that are hard to source during shortages, prepare a list of product alternatives that may be recommended for patients and prescribers. Note any important differences and reminders that should be advised to patients and other health professionals that will be using, prescribing or administering the products.

**IS YOUR PHARMACY READY TO RESPOND TO COVID-19?
KNOW WHAT TO DO AND BE PREPARED.**

References

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