



BRITISH ISLAMIC  
MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

Friday 6 March 2020

Asalaam alaykum,

We are writing to clarify the facts we currently know regarding the coronavirus, Covid-19, and how it is related to mosques in the UK. This guidance is equally applicable to other centres and congregational activities.

Currently we know that Covid-19 is spreading in the UK with the possibility it could spread rapidly. The government has recently increased the risk to the population from mild to moderate, and moved from a containment strategy to one of delaying the spread of the virus. This is a rapidly evolving situation that has significant implications for the public, particularly in mosques where large numbers of people frequently congregate.

### **What is Covid-19?**

SARS-CoV-2 is the technical name of this coronavirus, which is from the same family of viruses that cause the common cold. The initial symptoms it causes are similar to the viruses that give flu-like symptoms<sup>1</sup>. The virus is spread in the same way and has the same potential complications. At present, the mortality rate is thought to be 3.4%. This is higher than influenza (<1%, which is typically the most serious type of viral illness), but this figure is often changing as new evidence comes to light from cases around the world.

The illness caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus is called Covid-19, and predominantly affects the respiratory system causing breathing problems. It is particularly dangerous in elderly people and those with pre-existing health conditions which makes them vulnerable. Most of the deaths from this virus across the world have occurred in this group.

Our current understanding is that the coronavirus spreads in the saliva from an infected person landing on another, usually through coughing, sneezing or touching an infected surface. It is more likely to spread in crowds. There are cases where individuals have picked up Covid-19 without obvious exposure to known individuals or travel to affected countries.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

## Contact and travel guidance

At present, [the advice from the UK government](#) is that worshippers should not attend the mosque if they have:

- been to the Hubei province in China, Iran, South Korea or Northern Italy in the last 14 days
- flu-like symptoms (even if mild) and have returned, in the last 14 days, from mainland China, Italy, South Korea, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Japan, Laos, Macau, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam
- flu-like symptoms and have been within 2 metres of a confirmed case of Covid-19<sup>2</sup>

In these instances, they should self isolate - that is to stay at home, not go out, and have no contact with the public - and visit [NHS111 Online](#) or call 111.<sup>3</sup> Do not attend your GP practice or pharmacy as this places others at risk. This information is constantly changing and mosques should be vigilant for updates.

It is important to note that there has been recent legislation which allows employees to claim statutory sick pay earlier, but also laws to enforce isolation if advised by health professionals.

## What about Umrah and Hajj?

Covid-19 is currently prevalent in many countries across the world and we know there is an increased risk of spread of the virus where there are crowds of people. The [Saudi Arabia authorities](#) have, as of 4th March 2020, suspended Umrah for local residents and foreigners as a precaution to prevent the spread of the virus. This is not unprecedented in Islamic history due to outbreaks of disease, fire, and war.

It is not clear at the moment how long this suspension will last, and there is a possibility this could affect Hajj this year, but at the moment there is no way of telling. We would advise keeping up to date on the latest travel advice for UK citizens to Saudi Arabia and to speak with your travel agent.<sup>4</sup>

*“If you hear of an [outbreak of] plague in a land, do not enter it; and if the plague occurs in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place”* (Bukhari). The current advice is to avoid unnecessary international travel, particularly to & from areas or countries where there is a high number of Covid-19 cases.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public>

<sup>3</sup> <https://111.nhs.uk/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/saudi-arabia/health#coronavirus>

### **Will wearing face masks help?**

It is not advised to wear a face mask unless you are a carer of somebody who has Covid-19, or you have flu-like symptoms yourself and are wearing it to prevent the spread to others. A mask is [unlikely to help prevent](#) catching the infection as masks are usually ill fitting, not changed regularly, and can actually make it more likely as the virus can sit on the mask surface increasing the chance of infection if touched.<sup>5</sup>

### **What about visiting the sick?**

As we are unclear about the extent of the virus' spread, nor who is ill with a common cold and who may have Covid-19, we must limit contact with those who are unwell during this period. Pastoral and communal support can still be provided via telephone and video, as well as assisting with activities that do not require close contact.

### **What should mosques do about congregational prayers and Ramadan?**

At present there is no advice on restricting gatherings. However, there is the possibility that we may be advised to do so and/or quarantine certain areas. Now is a good opportunity for mosques to plan for such a situation and understand how it might work in practice. If we were told as such by the authorities, we would expect the mosque committee and scholars to show clear, decisive leadership and follow the public health advice which may include considering the suspension of congregational prayers and events.

If the situation was to continue until Ramadan, the advice regarding fasting should follow similar religious rulings to other flu-like illnesses, based on the information we have at present (unless severely ill with Covid-19). We are likely to understand this disease better in the coming weeks so the advice on the risk to individuals may change.

### **What measures can attendees take to protect against Covid-19?**

Attendees should be reminded and encouraged to wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water, for 20 seconds, after touching surfaces or before eating. They should avoid touching their face, particularly after touching surfaces.

They shouldn't share items such as cups, utensils, towels etc. They should be advised to avoid close contact with others, particularly actions such as hugging and shaking hands when greeting each other.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

If they cough they should do so into their sleeve or a tissue, throw it away, and then wash their hands with soap. **If attendees have a cough or flu-like illness prior to attending the mosque, they should avoid attending to prevent the spread of a possible infection.**

### **What can mosque management do?**

Mosque staff members and volunteers can help [prevent the spread of infection](#) by being vigilant with cleaning and reminding attendees to adhere to good hygiene measures. All surfaces that are touched by attendees should be getting regularly cleaned with a suitable disinfectant, including sinks, toilets, kitchen surfaces and carpets. Disposable cloths should preferably be used, or reusable cloths that are disinfected after each use. A two mop bucket technique should be used, with one for detergent and one for rinsing, cleaning and drying them after use.<sup>7</sup> The building and rooms should be kept well ventilated at all times.

Displaying posters produced by public health bodies regarding hygiene and handwashing will help educate attendees and disseminate accurate information.<sup>8</sup> Materials in non-English languages are forthcoming and will be available soon to download from the public health websites. Mosques should also consider having mechanisms to rapidly communicate with their congregation, if not already in place.

### **What to do if a worshipper becomes unwell while at the mosque?**

In the event a member of staff or worshipper becomes unwell while at the mosque and has arrived from any affected [countries or areas](#), or is identified as having had close contact with a confirmed case, they should be moved to a separate room for isolation. This room should preferably be well ventilated with an open window, and one where the door can be closed. If it is not possible to isolate them in a room then they should be moved to an area at least two metres away from other people. If it is possible, provide them with a face mask and ask them to wear it.

NHS 111 should be called for further advice and the unwell person kept isolated until advised otherwise. At present, there is no need to close the mosque or send anyone who has been in contact with the unwell person home.

If the person needs to go to the bathroom whilst waiting for medical assistance, they should use a separate bathroom if available. The bathroom should be cleaned with disinfectant before being used by anyone else.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/how-to-prevent-germs-from-spreading/>

<sup>8</sup> [Public Health England](#), [Public Health Wales](#), [Health Protection Scotland](#), [Public Health Agency Northern Ireland](#)

## What steps should we take now?

Given the complexity and rapidly evolving nature of Covid-19 it is important we establish clear lines of communication between experts, scholars and mosques - should these not already exist. Mosques should ensure they have plans in place as described above, including for contingencies in the event the guidance changes, and also start [proactively educating](#) their congregation and community.<sup>9</sup>

Currently there is no advice from authorities to avoid public gatherings. We know, however, that this virus spreads more easily in crowds and it is more severe in the elderly. With a significant number of our congregation being elderly and the close proximity during prayer, **we strongly advise informing attendees who have a new cough, shortness of breath, runny nose or fever, to stay away from congregational prayer and the mosque for the time being.** This is to protect themselves but also our vulnerable members too, and to limit the spread of the disease.

We encourage mosque committees to cascade this document to help dispel false narratives that are circulating.<sup>10</sup> Mosques may also consider announcing key messages to the congregation before prayers and reinforcing current guidance.

## How can we stay up to date with the latest information?

The British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA) is at hand to answer queries to help with the Muslim communities readiness to deal with Covid-19. The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) also has a website with relevant information to help with decision making.<sup>11</sup> This guidance is correct as of 6th March 2020 and is very likely to change in the coming days and weeks so please keep checking for updates.

The unity between mosques and our communities in times like these is essential.

May Allah ﷻ protect us and our families, and give us *tawfiq*.

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6 March 2020  
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<sup>9</sup> <https://campaignresources.phe.gov.uk/resources/campaigns/101/resources/5016>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>

<sup>11</sup> [www.mcb.org.uk/coronavirus](http://www.mcb.org.uk/coronavirus)