

Overview

- During a disease outbreak it is vital to ensure that communications with the community are trusted and clear.
- Providing information to the community is just the first step. What is critical is to persuade people to adopt safer, less risky practices that stop the disease spreading. Change of behaviour can mean accepting vaccinations, washing hands with soap, wearing mosquito repellent, or agreeing to be isolated from others to avoid infecting them.
- Communicating during an epidemic can be difficult because, if people in the community panic or do not trust the authorities or the health system, they may not listen or believe the information they receive from them. Some communities have strong beliefs in traditional medicine or do not accept certain treatments (including medicines and vaccines) or prefer other ways to prevent disease. Disease outbreaks can cause deep fear. People may also be grieving for those who are sick or have died.
- Two-way communication is therefore crucial in an epidemic. Put members of the community at the centre and work together with them to choose appropriate solutions that are effective in stopping the spread of disease.

How to communicate in an epidemic

- Instead of just informing the community (one-way communication), use two-way communication in an epidemic. After saying what you have to say, listen to what the community has to say in reply.
- Engage and involve community members and community leaders. Work together with them to choose and plan appropriate solutions for stopping the spread of disease.
- Talk to members of the community about their ideas and fears, to understand how much they know about the disease and its transmission, and to understand what motivates them and what stops them from changing their behaviour.
- When you communicate with a community, it is important to listen consistently for rumours and misunderstandings that might be spreading. Rumours can cause panic and fear. Under their influence, communities can lose trust in the health authorities or their ability to stop the epidemic and can reject interventions that would prevent the spread of disease.
- To mobilize a community effectively, **communication needs to be:**
 - **Simple and short.** People should be able to understand messages easily and be able to repeat them without difficulty.
 - **Trusted.** Delivered by people or a medium the community trusts.
 - **Accurate and specific.** Provide correct and precise information at all times. Messages should never confuse.
 - **Focused on action.** Messages should advise members of the community what to do. They should not provide heaps of information without action.
 - **Feasible and realistic.** Make sure that people can actually carry out the advice that you give.

- **Contextualized.** Information should reflect the needs and situation of the community. In all your messages, take account of social and cultural factors that might encourage community members to adopt safer behaviours (such as accepting vaccines) or prevent them from doing so.

Ways of communicating

When communicating with your community, use a range of different forms and methods of communication. Consider what people will prefer and trust, what your message is, who the target group is, and what resources you have. Consider:

- Door-to-door visits.
- Meeting community or religious leaders, or traditional healers or midwives.
- Group discussions. At these you might use visual tools, such as picture cards.
- Participatory dialogues. At these you could use three pile sorting, voting charts, mapping, barrier analysis or planning.
- Video or films.
- Songs, poems, drama, role-play or theatre.
- Community announcements (e.g. loud-speaker).
- SMS or social media.
- Radio broadcasts.

What you can do

- Start a two-way conversation with the community (ask and listen). Work with members of the community to choose solutions to stop the spread of disease that are appropriate for them and effective.
- Find out where the community obtains its health information, and who they trust to inform them (health authorities, community leaders, doctors, traditional healers, religious leaders, etc.).
- Find out what members of your community know, perceive and fear about the disease that threatens them. Familiarize yourself with how the disease is spread (transmitted) as well as local cultural and social practices. Work out what motivates people to change behaviour and what stops them from doing so.
- Keep in mind that a community is composed of different people and groups. Make sure you include everyone, especially those who are hidden, stigmatized or considered “different” because of their religion, sexual orientation, age, disability or illness, or for any other reason.
- Listen for rumours or incorrect information. Note when and where a rumour was heard and report it to your volunteer supervisor or National Society focal point immediately. Give the community clear, simple facts about the disease and explain clearly to them what they can do to protect themselves and their families.