



## ADVISORY ON

# SAFE MANAGEMENT OF WATER SUPPLY AND SANITATION SERVICES DURING COVID-19 CRISIS

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## **1.0 Background**

This advisory on the water supply and sanitation is relevant to virus contamination including Corona virus. It is intended for Urban Local Bodies and water supply and sewage practitioners and services providers who want to know more about the risk and practices associated with water supply and sewage in the States/UTs. It identifies sanitation workers as a vulnerable frontline category of essential services of water supply and sewage highlights the potential for services providers to step-up their performance and customer-orientation, and underlines the criticality of maintaining the supply chain of material for the sector.

The provision of safe water supply and sanitation services is essential to protect human health during all infectious disease outbreaks, including the COVID-19 outbreak. The application of good and consistently water and sewage management practices at Urban Local Body will help to prevent indirect human-to-human transmission of the COVID-19 virus.

WHO has brought out Interim guidance document on 19 March 2020 which supplements the infection prevention and control (IPC) documents by summarizing WHO guidance on water, sanitation and health care waste relevant to viruses, including corona viruses. It is intended for water and sanitation practitioners and providers and health care providers who want to know more about water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) risks and practices.

The following recommendations have been made by WHO concerning WASH and the COVID-19 virus.

- (a) Frequent and proper hand hygiene is one of the most important measures that can be used to prevent infection with the COVID-19 virus. WASH practitioners should work to enable more frequent and regular hand hygiene by improving facilities and using proven behavior-change techniques.
- (b) Safe management of drinking-water and sanitation services is essential during COVID-19 outbreak. Extra measures are not needed. Disinfection will facilitate more rapid die-off of the COVID-19 virus.
- (c) Many co-benefits will be realized by safely managing water and sanitation services and applying good hygiene practices.

## **2.0 Persistence of the COVID-19 Virus in Drinking Water**

There are two main known routes of transmission of the COVID-19 virus: respiratory and contact. Therefore, the immediate environment of an infected individual can serve as a source of transmission (contact transmission). Although persistence of corona virus in drinking water is possible, there is no evidence from surrogate human corona viruses that they are present in surface or groundwater sources or transmitted through contaminated drinking water. The COVID-19 virus is an enveloped virus, with a fragile

outer membrane. Generally, enveloped viruses are less stable in the environment and are more susceptible to oxidants, such as chlorine. While there is no evidence to date about survival of the COVID-19 virus in water or, the virus is likely to become inactivated significantly faster than non-enveloped human enteric viruses with known waterborne transmission.

The COVID-19 virus survival time depends on a number of factors, including the type of surface, temperature, relative humidity, and specific strain of the virus. It was reported that effective inactivation could be achieved within 1 minute using common disinfectants, such as 70% ethanol or sodium hypochlorite.

### **3.0 Keeping Water Supplies Safe**

The COVID-19 virus has not been detected in drinking-water supplies, and based on current evidence, the risk to water supplies is low. Laboratory studies has indicated that the virus could remain infectious in water contaminated with faeces for days to weeks. Mostly in all Indian cities, due to intermittent water supply, there are high chances of the sewage influx in the water supply pipelines.

As per the WHO guidelines, a number of measures can be taken to improve water safety, starting with protecting the source water; treating water at the point of distribution, collection, or consumption; and ensuring that treated water is safely stored at home in regularly cleaned and covered containers.

Conventional, centralized water treatment methods that use filtration and disinfection (chlorine, ultraviolet (UV) light, and other oxidants) should inactivate the COVID-19 virus. In India, the acceptable limit of free residual chlorine in drinking water is 0.2 mg/l under normal conditions and when protection against viral infection, it should be minimum 0.50 mg/l as per the BIS Indian Standard for Drinking Water (IS 10500:2012). WHO guidelines recommend, a residual concentration of free chlorine of  $\geq 0.5$  mg/L after at least 30 minutes of contact time at  $\text{pH} < 8$  shall be applied for the centralized disinfection during the outbreak. This has to be taken care by all water supply utilities across India.

In places where centralized water treatment and safe piped water supplies are not available, a number of household water treatment technologies are effective in removing or destroying viruses, including boiling or using high-performing ultrafiltration or Nano membrane filters, solar irradiation and, in non-turbid waters, UV irradiation and appropriately dosed free chlorine.

### **4.0 Safely Managing Wastewater and Faecal Waste**

There is no evidence that the COVID-19 virus has been transmitted via sewerage systems with or without wastewater treatment. However, there are evidences of

excretion of SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus in an infected person's stool. Although it's unlikely that sewage will become an important route of transmission, the pathogen's increasing circulation in communities will increase the amount of it flowing into the sewer system. The detection of the virus in sewage, even when the Covid-19 prevalence is low, indicates that sewage surveillance could be a sensitive tool to monitor the circulation of the virus in the population.

As part of an integrated public health policy, it is advised that the wastewater carried in sewerage systems should be treated in well-designed and well-managed centralized or decentralized wastewater treatment works, with a final disinfection to avoid possible virus contamination.

Moreover, sewage treatment plants in India include disinfection - this is a requirement to meet coliform discharge standards; surrogate for pathogens. Since the COVID 19 virus is an enveloped virus with a fragile outer membrane and thus, less stable in the environment and susceptible to oxidants, like chlorine, this disinfection is deemed capable of its inactivation.

There is a need to emphasize that the already-prescribed protocols are followed properly in the operations and maintenance of sewage/septage treatment plants (STPs and FSTPs) and monitoring must be strengthened at this juncture. Further, while the WHO guideline indicates that there is no evidence that sewage and wastewater treatment workers contracted Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, another type of Coronavirus in 2003, it is highly recommended that workers be provided with personal protective equipment (PPE; protective outer wear, gloves, boots, goggles or face shield and mask) and motivated to use these at all times, a major lapse in practice in India. In addition, workers need to be educated on frequent hand washing, and avoidance of touch - eyes, nose and mouth - with unwashed hands.

## **5.0 Toilet and Sanitation**

Consideration should be given to safely managing human excreta throughout the entire sanitation chain, starting with ensuring access to regularly cleaned, accessible, and functioning toilets or latrines and to the safe containment, conveyance, treatment, and eventual disposal of sewage.

For majority of Indian sanitary installations both in urban and rural areas (that do not have centralized sewerage), it is recommended that households are encouraged to use their toilets and keep these clean. For users of community and public toilets, it is recommended that these facilities are properly maintained and cleaned, and all sanitary workers are protected.

The toilet should be cleaned and disinfected at least twice daily by a trained cleaner wearing PPE (gown, gloves, boots, mask, and a face shield or goggles). Sodium

hypochlorite at 0.5% (equivalent to 5000 ppm) may be used for disinfecting surfaces. Particular care should also be taken to avoid splashing and the release of droplets while cleaning or emptying tanks.

Monitoring of the full fecal sludge management chain to be strengthened at this juncture, as a measure of precaution. All de-sludging operations, if being carried out to clean on-site tanks and pits, should be done only following the safety protocols and using the occupational safety equipment. All disposal of fecal matter must be done in designated treatment facilities (STPs, FSTPs, septage receiving stations, etc.) and not let out in open areas and water bodies, irrespective of distances.

## **6.0 Safe Management of Domestic Health Care Waste**

The health care waste must not be mixed with the municipal solid waste. It should be collected and handed over separately. Best practices for safely managing health care waste should be followed. There is no evidence that direct, unprotected human contact during the handling of health care waste has resulted in the transmission of the COVID-19 virus. All health care waste produced during the care of COVID 19 patients should be collected safely in designated containers and bags, treated, and then safely disposed of.

## **7.0 Personal Protective Equipment**

Best practices for protecting the health of workers should be followed. Workers should wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), which includes protective outerwear, gloves, boots, long-sleeved gown, goggles or a face shield, and a mask; after which the individuals should safely remove their PPE and soiled PPE should be put in a sealed bag for later safe laundering. They should perform hand hygiene with an alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water after removing PPE. They should avoid touching eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.

## **8.0 Safely Disposing of Greywater or Water from Washing PPE, Surfaces and Floors**

It is utmost important to dispose of the greywater or water from washing PPE, surfaces and floors. Currently, WHO recommends to clean utility gloves or heavy duty, reusable plastic aprons with soap and water and then decontaminate them with 0.5% sodium hypochlorite solution after each use. Single-use gloves (nitrile or latex) and gowns should be discarded after each use and not reused; hand hygiene should be performed after PPE is removed.

If greywater includes disinfectant used in prior cleaning, it does not need to be chlorinated or treated again. However, it is important that such water is disposed of in drains connected to a septic system or sewer or in a soak away pit. If greywater is

disposed of in a soak away pit, the pit should be fenced off within the health facility grounds to prevent tampering and to avoid possible exposure in the case of overflow.

## 9.0 Recommendations for Indian States, UTs, ULBs and Utilities

Along with the above global recommendations, there is a need for prioritizing the following actions:

- (i) **Water Supply:** The WHO Guidelines indicates low-risk to drinking water supplies if treated, however, laboratory studies show risks of virulence in fecal-contaminated water and therefore, chlorination and maintenance of residual chlorine is very important throughout of the distribution system. It is therefore recommended to increase a residual chlorine to  $\geq 0.5$  mg/l from the present residual chlorine level of 0.2 mg/l, as per BIS 10500 for protection against viral infection during the COVID-19 Crisis.
- (ii) **Sewage:** While there is no evidence of transmission of the COVID-19 virus transmission via sewerage systems with or without sewage treatment, O&M protocols must be followed properly in all STPs, and their performance may be monitoring closely at this juncture. A final disinfection step may be considered if existing wastewater treatment plants are not optimized to remove viruses. Appropriate dosage of chlorination may be decided, depending upon the quality of the effluent, as per the Manual of Sewerage and Sewage Treatment Systems, 2013, published by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Govt. of India.
- (iii) **Toilet:** It is recommended that households are encouraged to use their individual household toilets and keep these clean. A person who has been suspected or confirmed COVID-19 disease and quarantined should be provided with their own flush toilet or latrine. The toilet should be cleaned and disinfected at least twice daily by a trained cleaner wearing PPE. For users of community and public toilets, it is recommended that these facilities are properly maintained and cleaned by using disinfectants and all sanitary workers are protected with PPE.
- (iv) **Fecal Sludge:** Monitoring of the full fecal sludge management chain needs to be strengthened at this juncture, as a measure of precaution. Use of individual and community/public toilets must be ensured, and safety and safe-disposal of fecal wastes from on-site structures must be enforced and monitored. disinfectants, and all sanitary workers are protected with PPE.
- (v) **Sanitation Workers' Health and Safety:** Sanitation workers in India are particularly vulnerable to water and sanitation related risks and will be at the frontline of the essential services including sanitation, solid waste management,

etc. Therefore, their safety and welfare must be accorded highest priority by Urban Utilities and ULBs. Proper PPE gear to be provided and their use should be encouraged. Chennai Metro Water Supply and Sewerage Board (CMWSSB) has provided safety suits, N95 masks and gloves to their engineers, workers, tanker drivers and cleaners and the cost of the safety suits sourced from the State is Rs. 800 (US\$11.50) (This may be accessed at [https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/metrowater-procures-protective-gear-for-field-workers-steps-up-checks-at-facilities/article\\_31241675.ece](https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/metrowater-procures-protective-gear-for-field-workers-steps-up-checks-at-facilities/article_31241675.ece) and Times of India, April 5, 2020). All sanitary workers need to be educated on frequent hand washing, and avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.

- (vi) **Income and Wages to be Protected:** Especially since the majority are employed in the informal sector, as personnel of contractors, and not directly employed by public agencies food and essential supplies to be guaranteed if need be, with supplementary public provision.
- (vii) **Provisions in Sanitation Management Facilities:** These facilities – treatment sites or waste management sites (segregation, processing of solid waste, pumping stations, decanting stations, transfer stations for liquid waste, etc.) should have:
  - (a) facilities for regular hand hygiene using appropriate technique;
  - (b) provision for regular cleaning and disinfection of facilities, equipment and PPE;
  - (c) protocols and facilities for safe management of PPE and waste including any domestic hazardous waste and greywater arising from washing of facilities, PPE and equipment;
  - (d) adequate and accessible toilets facilities for staff, safe excreta management including keeping excreta (faeces and urine) separated from human contact and safe treatment and disposal in the environment;
  - (e) provision of safe drinking-water to staff; water supply for personal hygiene, laundry and cleaning.
- (viii) **Utilities Strengthening Customer Services and Relaxing Revenue Collection for say, a three-month Period:** As shortages of drinking water supplies could affect all protective individual actions and cleaning operations in health-care settings to prevent outbreak, imperative to ensure adequate water supply. Now more than ever with the onset of summer and dwindling water availability. Therefore, utilities must be encouraged to not only use ICT-based solutions for the management of operations, but also use these aggressively for keeping customers informed of water supply timings, minimize waste, quality issues, and so on. Further, like the RBI has recommended to banks, utilities may be provided budgetary subvention by the State Governments so that they are able to relax revenue collection and stop any disconnection or service-

outage that may inconvenience any customer, or public users of WASH facilities.

- (ix) **Supply Chain not to be Disrupted for Chemicals and Material Needed for WASH Installations:** Discuss with vendors and contractors to ensure supply of material and labour at WASH facilities. Diagnose supply chain linkages for materials ascertain challenges production and distribution of chemicals needed for WATSAN services and hygiene in household / community, health care and waste treatment facilities. While production and transportation of such chemicals should be considered as an essential commodity there is also the need to identify and suggest alternates to commonly used chemicals.
  
- (x) **Recycle and Reuse of Sewage:** Study and develop options for reuse of treated sewage for industries and agriculture to improve water availability and financial sustainability. Considering the hygiene requirements to battle COVID-19, water security across population groups is a necessity and sectoral swaps that ensure clean water availability for residents need to be analyzed and worked out in a phased manner.

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