



ITU Guidelines

On how to ensure that digital information, services and products are accessible by all people, including Persons with Disabilities during COVID-19¹

The world is facing an unprecedented experience in which ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) are almost the only possibility for people to communicate with one another. Humanity never before faced such digital dependence to access vital information or essential services and products to survive. Therefore, the importance of accessing information and instructions during the COVID-19 pandemic period is crucial for all people, regardless of our gender, ability, age or location.

For this reason, it is essential that key digital information on COVID-19 is distributed and available in accessible formats¹ to ensure that it will reach all people and that no one will be left behind, including persons with disabilities, in particular those with visual or hearing impairments that require the use of alternative solutions such as screen readers, captioning or sign language to read and understand digital information. Otherwise, many persons with disabilities will face a higher risk of contamination due to a lack of access to information on the measures to be considered and respected in this pandemic period.

Therefore, it is critically important to use multiple modes of communication like accessible websites, phone, radio, videos, leaflets, captioning, chats, etc. in addition to providing information in plain language, easy to read and in accessible formats. The availability and awareness of dedicated helplines which aim to ensure that public health information is accessible (including relay services for deaf and hard of hearing people) is essential to mitigate the spread and impact of the global pandemic.

Many persons with disabilities rely on regular home delivery of essential items for their wellbeing like medications, hygiene products and food. Therefore, in addition to the potential adverse impact of social distancing and breakdown of support networks, if retailers and healthcare product and service providers and other key organizations do not ensure the accessibility of their on-line information, services and products, many persons with disabilities will not only be at a disadvantage but their lives may be put at risk, due to a lack of access to vital information, medication and other critical products and services.

¹ [ITU Video tutorials on how to develop and remediate accessible digital content](#)

ITU- D self-paced on-line free of charge training courses in ICT accessibility at the following links:

- [ICT Accessibility - The Key to inclusive communication](#)
- [Web accessibility – the Cornerstone of an Inclusive Digital Society](#)

Given the major role of the ICTs in the global COVID-19 pandemic, the following guidelines containing key messages and actions are provided to ensure that digital information, services and products delivered globally are accessible to all people including Persons with Disabilities, and no one is left behind in this global challenging crisis.

KEY MESSAGES & ACTIONS

1. Ensure that key digital information, services and requirements on reducing contamination of COVID-19 are provided in accessible formats to enable all people including persons with disabilities to have access to this vital information:

Content and information regarding COVID-19 should be delivered in accessible formats so they can be perceived by everyone, including persons with disabilities. For example, public television advertisements, online videos and audio-only based webcasts will be inaccessible to deaf people unless they include subtitles or sign language interpretation. Like in any other emergency situation, apart from traditional media forms (TV and radio), the world of ICT includes different mechanisms that can facilitate communication to people with disabilities in such extraordinary situations: landlines, mobile audio, SMS/text messages and Internet-based services and resources such as websites, video, instant messaging apps, voice services on Internet Protocol (IP), web conferencing social media networks that allow instant communication and exchange of digital content (images, videos and documents) and satellite communications.

2. To ensure that all people including persons with disabilities can access, understand and use digital information and services, the following aspects must be considered:

- a. Public information** in audio and visual formats delivered through electronic display screens in public spaces such as railway platforms, retail stores, parks and other public areas can reach people who may not have access to personal ICT devices.² When possible, graphics and images should be displayed in addition to text. Sound alarms and/or sirens used during emergency situations must be accompanied by flashing lights to denote the nature and level of the threat.³ Information and notifications delivered through Public Address systems must also be provided through visual digital alternatives.⁴
- b. Radio** can be used with attachments or with special features to enable their use by people who are deaf or hard of hearing. For example, devices that can transmit broadcasts as vibrations, flashing lights and simple texts to alert individuals who are

² *Department for Transport and Transport Scotland. [Design Standards for Accessible Railway Stations - A joint Code of Practice, page 109, K7. Signs – display screens.](#)

³ *US Access Board. [702 Emergency Alarm Systems](#)

⁴ *Department for Transport and Transport Scotland. [Design Standards for Accessible Railway Stations - A joint Code of Practice, page 115, L1. Announcements – general.](#)

deaf and hard of hearing of COVID-19 restrictions and or measures imposed by Government to limit contamination. Online radio live or podcasts should include the transcription of the content.⁵

- c. **Television:** Closed captioning/subtitling in local languages must be provided to make audio commentary related to COVID-19 accessible to people who have hearing impairments or who may have difficulty understanding the language. In addition, sign language interpreters should be used when providing televised information about the pandemic situation.⁶
- d. **SMS:** If information is sent out only as SMS, people who need non-visual inputs and do not have access to high-end devices that can convert text to other formats such as audio will be excluded. Hence, warnings and alerts regarding measures related to COVID-19 and pandemic related measures should also go out in multiple formats across different dissemination channels. All images attached to messages must include alternative descriptions.
- e. **WhatsApp** is accessible and works with Talkback and Voice Over. Siri will read WhatsApp messages aloud and on newer phones and can even dictate messages through Siri. When using WhatsApp avoid the use of emojis.
- f. **E-mail** notifications regarding COVID-19 should be enabled in multiple languages. The software should be designed as per accessibility guidelines to enable it to operate seamlessly on different devices and with a user's assistive technology. Some desktop alerting systems can ensure that pop-up messages are delivered in different formats in addition to just texts and audio beeps. Use of graphics within the alerts related to COVID-19 may assist people who have trouble understanding text. All images must include alternative descriptions.⁷
- g. **Social networks:** The new versions of the most popular social media networks are increasingly becoming accessible. That means that Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube do offer accessibility features. It is important that the medical and information agencies publishing vital information regarding COVID-19 and pandemic measures on these platforms know about digital content accessibility to ensure that the messages are accessible to all.⁸

⁵*National Council on Disability at "[Effective Communications for People with Disabilities: Before, During, and After Emergencies](#)". Page 45: Accessibility solutions; page 104: Table 9. Methods of Receiving and Verifying Alerts; page 148: Emerging Practice: Captioned Radio

⁶*National Council on Disability. "[Effective Communications for People with Disabilities: Before, During, and After Emergencies](#)". Page 45: Accessibility solutions; page 104: Table 9. Methods of Receiving and Verifying Alerts

⁷*Microsoft: [Make your Outlook email accessible to people with disabilities](#)

⁸*UK Government Digital Service. [Social Media Playbook - Accessibility](#)

- h. Websites** providing COVID-19 and related information to reduce global /regional or national contamination must be previously tested for accessibility⁹ to ensure that persons with disabilities do not face barriers in accessing the important information shared on the website. All related digital documents (word, PDF) provided through website may be accessible/unusable by persons using screen readers if they are in formats that cannot be read aloud, such as JPEG files or inaccessible image-based PDFs (e.g. scanned images).

On the other hand, images and graphics are excellent ways to depict content for people with cognitive disabilities, or people with linguistic differences; however, these must be supplemented with textual information to ensure that persons with visual impairments using voice or braille display output screen reading software are able to receive and understand the information. Links to external websites should be descriptive. Every element of the website should be accessible via the keyboard for persons that do not use a mouse.¹⁰

For additional ITU resources to support digital inclusion please see at: [ITU-D Digital Inclusion](#)

ⁱ *These guidelines are non-exhaustive*

⁹ *[The standard to ensure Web Content Accessibility being the WCAG 2.1](#)

¹⁰ *[W3C Web Accessibility Initiative tutorials](#)

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