

# COVID TREATMENT QuickStart — CONSORTIUM —

Oral antiviral treatment options for COVID-19 were rapidly developed but access remains challenging in low-income countries, magnifying large inequities that have persisted throughout the pandemic. Moreover, access to effective drugs is not enough to improve outcomes - it is vital to implement efficient and effective testing strategies, linked to access to treatments, that will facilitate uptake of these new tools. “We cannot fight blindly,” said Silver Mashate, Program Manager of the African Society for Laboratory Medicine (ASLM), a panelist of the [second Quick Start Learning Network session](#) held on 15 February 2023. This sentiment was emphasized throughout the session on COVID-19 Testing and High-Risk Populations. Prioritizing testing is the foundation of successful test-and-treat programs. Five key themes emerged for successful testing implementation emerged from the discussion, focused on **the importance of:**

1. **Integration:** Testing programs must be integrated into existing programs within health systems.
2. **Identifying and reaching high-risk populations:** Testing must be effectively targeted to ensure the greatest benefit.
3. **Community:** Engagement at the community level is crucial to generate demand.
4. **Access:** Increasing access to testing through decentralized self-testing ensures a further breadth of populations reached.
5. **Sharing data and insights:** As strategies and models continuously evolve, rapid sharing of data and insights must be common practice.

Mwaba Mulenga, Senior Associate at CHAI Zambia, provided an update and a description of lessons learned on the initial test-and-treat rollout effort in Zambia. As the first Quick Start

country to receive donated antivirals, Zambia distributed treatments quickly to high-risk patients via a tertiary hospital model where testing is offered at all entry points, with emphasis on certain clinics (e.g. HIV, non-communicable disease, outpatient) where patients at a higher risk of developing severe COVID-19 could be easily identified. The Ministry of Health generated demand for the treatment through a press release and an expert-led series of radio and TV programs, allowing listeners to ask questions in real-time. Initial lessons from Zambia's in-country launch include the importance of coordinated teams to ensure a seamless testing process and prioritizing high-risk patients, given the high demand generated. As of mid-February, several hundred COVID-19 patients have been treated with oral antivirals.

Testing-focused panelists included Silver Mashate, Program Manager of the African Society for Laboratory Medicine (ASLM), Catherine Okoi, M.Phil., Senior Technical Advisor (Laboratory) to the Director General at Nigeria's Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, and Dr. Alexander Martin-Odoom, Senior Technical Advisor for CHAI Ghana. The panelists spoke on their countries' experiences on testing, and how strategies have shifted over the past year. Treatment is not effective without proper testing. This sentiment is a crucial first step in deploying successful test-and-treat programs.

The COVID Treatment Quick Start Learning Network will meet monthly and is open to all. Please [subscribe to our mailing list](#) and stay tuned for our next meeting date. We welcome [questions and suggestions](#) for future discussion topics. Our aim is to:

1. Provide a platform for learning and collaboration amongst a diverse set of stakeholders on COVID test-and-treat implementation.
2. Share successes and lessons learned in development and implementation of COVID test-and-treat programs globally to enable rapid dissemination of good practices.
3. Address shared challenges across test-and-treat programs to accelerate their implementation; and
4. Inform operational research priorities and provide pathways for dissemination of emerging evidence and insights.

The COVID Treatment Quick Start Consortium brings together [Duke University](#), [Americares](#), the [Clinton Health Access Initiative](#) (CHAI), and [COVID Collaborative](#) as implementing partners, with support from the [Open Society Foundations](#), [Pfizer](#), and the [Conrad N. Hilton Foundation](#). The consortium supports governments to introduce and scale up access to new and effective COVID-19 oral antiviral therapies in high-risk populations. Partner countries include Ghana, Kenya, Laos, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.