

SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome)

Periodically, new infectious diseases have been introduced to the world's population. In the last two decades, we have seen AIDS, West Nile Fever, Ebola virus, Legionnaire's disease, Mad Cow disease, to name a few. Some of these are new infectious agents, some are agents that have been residing in other species which are now transferred to humans, and some are infectious agents which have altered their genetic structure to make them more dangerous.

Whenever one of these agents becomes present, because there is a lot of uncertainty as to how it is spread, as well as diagnosis and treatment questions, there is a thirst for information by the public. SARS is such a new agent. We don't know that much about it right now. We will certainly know a lot more in the months to come. Here are some of the answers that we have at present.

What causes SARS? SARS is caused by a virus. The virus appears to be in the family of viruses called Coronaviruses. It is possible that the Coronavirus may cause disease by interacting with other infectious agents or other things that normally reside innocently in the human body.

How long has SARS been around? We are not sure, but probably not too long in its current form. It was first recognized on Feb. 26, 2003 in Hanoi, Vietnam by World Health Organization investigator Carlos Urbani, who subsequently succumbed to the illness. As of April 10, the Centers for Disease Control reported 166 suspected cases in the US (an increase of 10 over the prior week.). As of April 14, the Hong Kong Dept of Health reported 1,190 cases, with 47 deaths and 220 hospital discharges. The Chinese Ministry of Health is reported on April 14, 1,418 cases, with 64 deaths and 1,088 discharges.

Where is it this outbreak currently residing? The bulk of new cases of SARS are still in Vietnam, Singapore and mainland China, and Hong Kong. Cases in other countries appear to be related to travel to one of these areas or close contact with some one who has recently traveled to these areas.

What are the symptoms of SARS? SARS starts as a flu-like illness, with muscle aches, fever, chills, and cough. These symptoms are, of course, very common. It then progresses to pneumonia, which can be severe.

Are there any tests to diagnose SARS? Yes- there are three diagnostic tests that have been developed so far to detect the coronavirus. The tests, however, may not be widely available.

Is there any treatment? The treatment is supportive- i.e.- general support for hydration, blood pressure, oxygen, respiratory assistance if necessary. There is no specific treatment available against the virus, itself.

How does one catch SARS? It appears that the virus is transmitted by droplets, instead of being fully airborne. This means that one has to have fairly close exposure to someone who is infected (e.g. standing within a few feet for a period of time). It does not seem to spread into air conditioning systems, like legionnaire's disease.

Do I need to worry or take special precautions? If you have not traveled to southeast Asia or have been in close contact with someone that has had recent travel to that area, at the current time, there is no need to worry. If you have been in close contact with someone who has developed SARS but have no symptoms (fever or cough), the only recommendations are for observation at home for 10-14 days. If someone has been in close contact and subsequently develops pneumonia, current recommendations are for hospitalization.

If I want to learn more or keep abreast of this, where should I go? The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had an information page (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars/>)

Keep in mind that there are continually new developments regarding SARS, so this communication will have a "short shelf life" with respect to being up-to-date.