

SARS

SARS, which stands for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, is a previously unknown virus that was first identified in China, Vietnam, and Hong Kong in March 2003.

It has since spread to many countries, with hundreds of people infected.

Where did SARS come from?

Evidence points to SARS originating in China, but investigation continues into its exact origin. Scientists are now sure that it is a virus that previously only infected animals and mutated (or changed) to a form that affects humans.

What kind of virus is it?

SARS is caused by a previously unrecognized coronavirus, which is the family of viruses that includes the common cold. Coronaviruses are a group of viruses that look like a halo or crown when seen under a microscope.

What are the symptoms of SARS?

The illness usually begins with a high fever (greater than 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit) *and*

- ◆ One or more clinical findings of respiratory illness, such as cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, or bluish coloring in the fingers or lips due to lack of oxygen *and*
- ◆ Travel within ten days of onset of symptoms to an area with documented or suspected community transmission of SARS or transit through an airport in an area with documented or suspected community transmission *or*
- ◆ Close contact within ten days of onset of symptoms with a person known to be a suspect SARS case. Close contact is defined as having cared for, having lived with, or having direct contact with respiratory secretions and/or body fluids of a patient known to be a suspect SARS case.

A probable case is a suspect case with one of the following:

- ◆ X-ray evidence of pneumonia or respiratory distress syndrome *or*
- ◆ Autopsy findings consistent with respiratory distress syndrome without an identifiable cause.

How does SARS spread?

The primary way SARS spreads is by close person-to-person contact, meaning when someone sick with SARS coughs or sneezes droplets into the air and someone else breathes them in. The virus can also spread when a person touches a surface or object that has been contaminated with infectious droplets and then touches his or her mouth, nose or eye(s). It may also be possible to spread SARS through the air. However, close contact with an infected person has the highest risk of spreading SARS to others.

What is the incubation period for SARS?

The time after exposure until someone gets sick is from two to 10 days, with the average being seven days.

How long is someone with SARS infectious to others?

Information to date suggests that people are most likely to be infectious when they have symptoms, such as fever or cough. However, it is not known how long before or after their symptoms begin that the patients with SARS might be able to transmit the disease to others.

**Kalamazoo County Public Health
Emergency Information Line:
269-373-5300**

Does anyone die of SARS?

About eight percent on average of the people who contract SARS die because they get a severe enough case and/or have a compromised immune system. Most people recover.

Who is at risk of getting SARS?

The vast majority of people who contract SARS do so because of close contact with someone who is infected, such as those sharing a household with a SARS patient and health care workers who did not use infection control procedures while taking care of a SARS patient.

How is SARS diagnosed?

Health care providers diagnose SARS based on the symptoms and the likelihood that a person has been exposed to SARS. Laboratory tests are available to confirm the diagnosis. The results of these tests take several days to several weeks.

Is there a treatment for SARS?

There is no cure or specific treatment, since cases differ in symptoms and severity, but it is recommended that patients receive the same treatment that would be used for anyone with serious community-acquired atypical pneumonia of unknown cause. This includes supportive therapy such as fluids and oxygen and in some cases antivirals.

What can I do to prevent SARS?

The CDC recommends several precautions people can take to help prevent contracting SARS:

- ◆ Wash hands frequently with soap and hot water or with an alcohol-based hand wash;
- ◆ Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze, then wash your hands;
- ◆ Consider postponing all unnecessary travel to regions affected by SARS;
- ◆ Avoid sharing eating utensils, and
- ◆ See a doctor if you are experiencing any of the symptoms of SARS.

If I think I have been exposed to SARS what should I do?

If you think you or someone in your family might have SARS, you should:

- ◆ Consult a health care provider as soon as possible *and*
- ◆ Cover your mouth and nose with tissue when coughing or sneezing. If you have a surgical mask, wear it when you are around others. A mask can reduce the number of droplets coughed into the air.



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