

Q & A on Coronaviruses

(Source: World Health Organization)

➤ **What is a corona virus?**

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses found in both animals and humans. Some infect people and are known to cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

➤ **What is a “novel coronavirus”?**

A novel coronavirus (CoV) is a new strain of coronavirus that has not been previously identified in humans. The new, or “novel” coronavirus, now called 2019-nCoV, had not previously been detected before the outbreak was reported in Wuhan, China in December 2019.

➤ **Is the new virus the same as SARS?**

No. Novel coronavirus is from the same family of viruses as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV) but it is not the same virus.

➤ **How dangerous is it?**

As with other respiratory illnesses, infection with novel coronavirus can cause mild symptoms including a runny nose, sore throat, cough, and fever. It can be more severe for some persons and can lead to pneumonia or breathing difficulties. More rarely, the disease can be fatal. Older people, and people with pre-existing medical conditions (such as, diabetes and heart disease) seem to be at more risk of becoming severely ill with the virus.

➤ **Can I catch novel coronavirus from my pet?**

No, at present there is no evidence that pets such as cats and dogs have been infected or have spread the virus.

➤ **Can the novel coronavirus be transmitted from person to person?**

Yes, this virus causes respiratory disease and can be transmitted from person to person, usually after close contact with an infected patient, for example in a household, workplace, or hospitals.

➤ **What can I do to protect myself?**

Stay informed of the latest information on the outbreak, by accessing Epidemiology Unit website (www.epid.gov.lk), and take care of your health by doing the following:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub

Why? Washing your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub kills the virus if it is on your hands.

- Maintain at least 1 metre (3 feet) distance between yourself and other people, particularly those who are coughing, sneezing and have a fever.

Why? When someone who is infected with a respiratory disease like novel coronavirus, coughs or sneezes they project small droplets containing the virus. If you are too close, you can breathe in the virus.

- Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth

Why? Hands touch many surfaces which can be contaminated with the virus. If you touch your eyes, nose or mouth with your contaminated hands, you can transfer the virus from the surface to yourself.

- If you have fever, cough and difficulty breathing, seek medical care early. Tell your doctor if you have travelled in China where novel coronavirus has been reported, or if you have been in close contact with someone who has travelled from China and has respiratory symptoms.

Why? Whenever you have fever, cough and difficulty breathing it's important to seek medical attention promptly as this may be due to a respiratory infection or other serious condition. Respiratory symptoms with fever can have a range of causes, and depending on your personal travel history and circumstances, novel coronavirus could be one of them.

- If you have mild respiratory symptoms and no travel history to or within China, carefully practice basic respiratory and hand hygiene and stay home until you are recovered, if possible.

➤ **Should I wear a mask to protect myself?**

Wearing a medical mask can help limit the spread of some respiratory disease. However, using a mask alone is not guaranteed to stop infections and should be combined with other prevention measures including hand and respiratory hygiene and avoiding close contact (at least 1 metre /3 feet distance between yourself and other people).

You should use masks only if you have;

- respiratory symptoms (such as coughing or sneezing)
- suspected novel coronavirus infection with mild symptoms
- cared for someone with suspected novel coronavirus infection

A coronavirus infection is suspected if a person has travelled in an area in China where this virus has been reported, or has close contact with someone who travelled from China and developed respiratory symptoms.

➤ **How to put on, use, take off and dispose of a face mask**

- Before putting on a face mask, wash hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub
- Cover mouth and nose with mask and make sure there are no gaps between your face and the mask
- Avoid touching the mask while using it; if you do, clean your hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub
- Do not re-use single-use masks
- To remove the mask: remove it from behind (do not touch the front of mask); discard immediately in a closed bin; wash hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub

➤ **Who can get this virus?**

People living or travelling in an area where the novel coronavirus infection is circulating may be at risk of infection. At present, this virus is circulating in China where the vast majority of people infected have been reported. Those infected from other countries are among people who have recently travelled from China or who have been living or working closely with those travellers, such as family members or co-workers.

Health workers caring for persons who are sick with novel coronavirus are at higher risk and must protect themselves with appropriate infection prevention and control procedures.

➤ **Who is at risk from developing severe illness?**

While we still need to learn more about how novel coronavirus affects people, thus far, older people, and people with pre-existing medical conditions (such as diabetes and heart disease) appear to be more at risk of developing severe disease.

➤ **How does this virus spread?**

The new coronavirus is a respiratory virus which spreads primarily through contact with an infected person through respiratory droplets generated when a person, for example, coughs or sneezes, or through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose.

It is important that everyone practice good respiratory hygiene. For example, sneeze or cough into a flexed elbow, or use a tissue and discard it immediately into a closed bin. It is also very important for people to wash their hands regularly with either soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub.

➤ **How long does the virus survive on surfaces?**

It is still not known how long the novel coronavirus survives on surfaces, although preliminary information suggests the virus may survive a few hours. Simple disinfectants can kill the virus making it no longer possible to infect people.

➤ **What's the difference between illness caused by novel coronavirus infection and other respiratory tract infections?**

People with novel coronavirus infection or other respiratory tract infections typically develop respiratory symptoms such as fever, cough and runny nose. Even though many symptoms are alike, they are caused by different viruses. Because of their similarities, it can be difficult to identify the disease based on symptoms alone. That's why laboratory tests are required to confirm if someone has novel coronavirus. It is important that people who have cough, fever and difficulty breathing seek medical care early.

➤ **How long is the incubation period?**

The incubation period is the time between infection and the onset of clinical symptoms of disease. According to current estimates the incubation period is around 14 days. WHO recommends to follow up contacts of confirmed cases for 14 days.

➤ **Can novel coronavirus be caught from a person who presents no symptoms?**

It may be possible that people infected with novel coronavirus may be infectious before showing significant symptoms. However, based on currently available data, the people who have symptoms are causing the majority of virus spread.

➤ **Is it safe to receive a package from China or any other place where the virus has been identified?**

Yes, it is safe. People receiving packages are not at risk of contracting the new coronavirus. From experience with other coronaviruses, we know that these types of viruses don't survive long on objects, such as letters or packages.

➤ **Are antibiotics effective in preventing and treating the novel coronavirus infection?**

No, antibiotics do not work against viruses, they only work on bacterial infections. The novel coronavirus is a virus and, therefore, antibiotics should not be used as a means of prevention or treatment.

➤ **Are there any specific medicines to prevent or treat novel coronavirus infection?**

To date, there is no specific medicine recommended to prevent or treat the novel coronavirus. However, those infected with this virus should receive appropriate care to relieve and treat symptoms, and those with severe illness should receive optimized supportive care.

If you want to protect yourself from getting infected with the new coronavirus, you should maintain basic hand and respiratory hygiene and avoid close contact, when possible, with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing and sneezing.

Measures such as taking vitamin C, wearing multiple face masks, and taking self-medication such as antibiotics are not specifically recommended for novel coronavirus as they are not effective to protect yourself and can be even harmful.

In any case, if you have fever, cough and difficulty breathing seek medical care early to reduce the risk of developing a more severe infection and be sure to share your recent travel history with your doctor.

More Q & A

➤ **How infective is (transmissible) the novel Coronavirus?**

The infectivity (transmissibility) of an agent is presented by an indicator named, R0 (“R naught”). This tells the number of cases one case infect on average over the course of its infectious period, in an otherwise uninfected, un-immune person. The R0 values of several infections is mentioned below.

MERS - CoV - <1

Ebola - 1.5-2

SARS - 4

HIV - 4

Measles - 12-18

Value estimated for 2019-nCoV is 1.4 - 2.5 as at 30/01/2020 (likely to be changed with newer evidence)

➤ **How fatal the disease?**

Fatality is measured by an indicator known as Case Fatality Rate (CFR). It is presented as a percentage. It says how many deaths could occur out of 100 infected individuals.

In SARS epidemic which occurred in 2002-2003, CFR was 9.6%

In MERS Corona epidemic which occurred in 2012, CFR was 34.4%

In 2019-nCoV, it is estimated as 2%

- **I arrived in Sri Lanka within 14 days from a country where novel Coronavirus has been reported. What should I do?**

Please refer to the “Advices for high risk country returnee” in this web site.

- **I have arrived to Sri Lanka from a high risk country, but now 14 days has passed. What should I do?**

If you don't have symptoms, you don't have to do anything. If you have above mentioned symptoms which arose after 14 days, it is unlikely that it could be 2019-nCoV. But if you start to develop symptoms within 14 days, please refer to the “Advices for high risk country returnee”.

- **Is there a vaccine for 2019-nCoV?**

To date, no vaccine is discovered for 2019-nCoV.

- **What advises should be given to the school children?**

Please refer to the “Information leaflet to school children” which is available in this web site.

Epidemiology Unit,

Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medical Services

12.02.2020