

SEVERE ACUTE RESPIRATORY SYNDROME (SARS)

WHAT IS SARS?

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) is a contagious form of pneumonia first identified in southern China in late 2002. The syndrome has only recently been recognised and information is therefore limited.

WHAT CAUSES SARS?

The organism that causes SARS is thought to be a new type of coronavirus.

WHO IS AT RISK OF CONTRACTING SARS?

Currently, the risk of people in Australia contracting SARS is probably low. Affected areas have included parts of China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Toronto. For an updated list of affected areas, see the World Health Organization's website at www.who.int.

Those who have been in close contact with someone who has been diagnosed with SARS are also at risk. Close contact may include having cared for, lived with, or having direct contact with the fluid from the nose and throat, and faeces of SARS patients.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

People usually start to develop symptoms two to seven days after being exposed to the virus. People with SARS have a fever (greater than 38°C) and respiratory symptoms that may include cough or breathing difficulties. These symptoms usually begin abruptly. Other symptoms include headache, chills, muscle aches, poor appetite, dizziness, diarrhoea and sore throat. Some people with SARS develop severe pneumonia (lung infection). The overall death rate is about 15 per cent. The risk of death increases with age.

HOW IS SARS DIAGNOSED?

At present, the diagnosis is only likely to occur in people who have travelled to a country affected by SARS. Even in such people, the symptoms of SARS are commonly seen in other illnesses, so your doctor may test for a variety of infections before diagnosing SARS. Specific tests for the SARS virus are being developed.

HOW IS SARS SPREAD?

SARS is thought to be spread through contaminated droplets from a person sick with the illness (through

coughing or sneezing) or by contaminated hands or objects. Only people in close contact with a SARS patient are thought to be at risk. Rarely, the virus may be spread in the air from very ill patients. People who do not have symptoms are not thought to be infectious.

People who have fever and respiratory symptoms should seek advice from their doctor, but call ahead before visiting so your doctor can prepare.

HOW CAN YOU HELP PREVENT THE SPREAD OF SARS?

If you are suspected of having SARS and are being cared for at home, you should:

- follow the instructions given by your doctor;
- limit your activities outside the home: for example, do not go to work, school or public places;
- wash your hands often and well, especially after you have blown your nose;
- cover your mouth and nose with tissue when you sneeze or cough;
- if possible, wear a surgical mask when around other people in your home;
- refrain from sharing cutlery, towels or bedding with anyone in your home until these items have been washed with soap and hot water;
- clean surfaces (counter or tabletops, door knobs, bathroom fixtures) that have been contaminated by body fluids (sweat, saliva, mucous, or even vomit or urine) from the SARS patient with a household disinfectant used according to the manufacturer's instructions. Wear disposable gloves during all cleaning activities. Throw these out when you are finished and do not reuse them;
- follow these instructions for 10 days after your fever and respiratory symptoms have gone away.

For updated guidelines, see the NSW Department of Health website at www.health.nsw.gov.au or the World Health Organization website at www.who.int.

For more information please contact your doctor, local public health unit or community health centre—See under NSW Government at the front of the White Pages.

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