
2019-Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV)

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is 2019-nCoV?

Human coronaviruses are common throughout the world. The name corona refers to a crown because these viruses have crown-like spikes on their surface when viewed under an electron microscope. There are many different coronaviruses identified in animals but only a small number of these can cause disease in humans. Some coronaviruses such as 229E, NL63, OC43 and HKU1 are common causes of illness, including respiratory illness, in humans throughout the world. Sometimes coronaviruses infecting animals can evolve to cause disease in humans and become a new (novel) coronavirus for humans. Examples of this are the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV), first reported from Saudi Arabia in 2012, and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (SARS-CoV), first recognized in China in 2002. On January 9, 2020 the World Health Organization reported that a new coronavirus was identified in China associated with an outbreak of pneumonia in Wuhan City, Hubei Province. This virus is the 2019-nCoV. The majority of the case-patients initially identified were dealers and vendors at a seafood, poultry and live wildlife market (Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market) in Jiangnan District of Hubei Province. This suggests that the novel coronavirus has a possible zoonotic origin. The specific source of the virus is not yet known.

2. Who is at most risk for 2019-nCoV?

Currently travellers to Wuhan, China and other affected areas of China are at greatest risk of infection with 2019-nCoV. Infections in travellers outside China have not resulted in outbreaks in other countries. Please consult the latest guidance for information on which countries are experiencing outbreaks of 2019-nCoV. Information can be accessed at <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports>.

3. What is the risk of 2019-nCoV infection in humans in South Africa?

There have been no cases of 2019-nCoV reported in South Africa. Active surveillance is in place to identify an imported case should one occur. People who develop symptoms of respiratory illness including cough, fever and shortness of breath within 14 days of travel to countries where coronavirus is known to be circulating should seek medical care early and share information about travel history with their doctors.

4. How is 2019-nCoV transmitted?

While the first cases probably involved exposure to an animal source, the virus now seems to be spreading from person-to-person. It is thought to happen mainly via respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes, similar to how influenza and other respiratory pathogens spread. Thus far the majority of cases have occurred in people with close physical contact to cases and healthcare workers caring for patients with 2019-nCoV.

5. What are the signs and symptoms of 2019-nCoV infection in humans?

Current symptoms reported for patients with 2019-nCoV have included mild to severe respiratory illness with fever, cough, and difficulty breathing. The complete clinical picture with regard to 2019-nCoV is still not fully clear. Reported illnesses have ranged from infected people with little to no symptoms to people being severely ill and dying. Patients with underlying illness and the elderly appear to be at increased risk of severe illness.

6. How is 2019-nCoV diagnosed?

2019-nCoV is diagnosed by a laboratory test, polymerase chain reaction (PCR) molecular test, on a respiratory tract sample (e.g. sample from nose, throat or chest). For specific guidance on sample collection and transport please visit the NICD's website: <http://www.nicd.ac.za/diseases-a-z-index/novel-coronavirus-infection/>

7. How is 2019-nCoV infection treated?

Treatment is supportive (e.g. provide oxygen for patients with shortness of breath or treatment for fever). There is no specific antiviral treatment available. Antibiotics do not treat viral infections. However, antibiotics may be required if bacterial secondary infection develops.

8. How can 2019-nCoV infection in humans be prevented?

Currently there is no vaccine for 2019-nCoV. Officials in China have intensified efforts to contain the spread of the virus. There are no specific measures currently recommended to prevent 2019-nCoV but the following can provide protection against infection with coronaviruses and many other viruses that are more common in South Africa:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick
- Stay home when you are sick and try and keep distance from others at home
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a flexed elbow or a tissue, then throw the tissue in the bin.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.
- Avoid contact with farm or wild animals (alive or dead), animal markets, and products that come from animals (such as uncooked meat).

9. What measures have been put in place in South Africa to minimise the risk of transmission should cases be imported

Fever screening is in place at international airports. If there is a suspected case, procedures are in place for case isolation and management as well as rapid specimen collection and transport so that the diagnosis can quickly be made. Suspected cases will be managed at designated hospitals with isolation facilities. Protocols are in place for follow up of case contacts to ensure that the virus does not spread.

10. Should I travel to China now?

- Given the restrictions on movement within Hubei Province and Guangdong Province, all non-essential travel to these regions should be postponed. South African citizens are permitted to travel to China and there are no further restrictions of trade or travel at this time. People who travel to China or areas where 2019-nCoV is known to be circulating should avoid visiting the animal markets (avoid contact with farm or wild animals), products that come from animals (such as uncooked meat) and avoid contact with sick people.

11. Who can I contact for more information?

Visit the NICD website at www.nicd.ac.za for further information. For medical/clinical related queries by health care professionals only, contact the NICD Hotline +27 (0) 82 883 9920 (for use by healthcare professionals only). For laboratory related queries call the Centre for Respiratory Diseases and Meningitis (011-555-0315/7/8 or 011-555-0488).

Guidelines and case definitions are available on the NICD website <http://www.nicd.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2019-nCov-Quick-reference-27-01-2020-Final.pdf>