



SEVERE ACUTE RESPIRATORY SYNDROME (SARS)

The Issue

For most Canadians, the risk of getting Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) is extremely low. However, it is important to know the symptoms and risk factors of SARS, so you can take steps to minimize your risk.

Background

People affected by SARS develop a fever, followed by respiratory symptoms, such as a cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing. In some cases, the symptoms become increasingly severe, and patients may require oxygen support and mechanical help to breathe. Other symptoms of SARS may include muscle aches, headaches, sore throat and diarrhea.

SARS appeared first in China and then spread to other countries. The first Canadian cases were identified in March 2003 in people who had traveled to Hong Kong and returned to Canada. Subsequent cases in Canada were traced to the first cases through close contacts, including health care workers, or to other travelers who had been in areas of Asia affected by SARS.

We continue to monitor the situation very closely, and we are in regular contact with the World Health Organization to obtain the most up to date information on the global situation of SARS, and share this information with provinces and territories.

SARS is a new disease. There is still a great deal about SARS that remains unknown, and it is going to take time for scientists to discover how to diagnose SARS rapidly, and how to prevent it or treat it successfully.

How SARS is Spread

SARS is caused by a previously unknown type of coronavirus. In addition, there may be factors related to the infected person's immune system

or factors in the environment that affect the symptoms and severity of SARS. Normally, coronaviruses cause mild to moderate upper-respiratory symptoms, such as the common cold.

SARS is spread through close contact with someone who is infected with the SARS coronavirus. Examples of close contact include living in the same household, providing care to someone with SARS, or having direct contact with respiratory secretions and body fluids of someone affected by SARS.

To date, it appears that people with SARS are not contagious until they develop symptoms. This may take up to ten days from the time they were in close contact with someone who has SARS.

Risk Factors for SARS

At this time, the only known risk factors for developing SARS are recent travel to areas where SARS is spreading locally, or recent close contact with someone who has SARS or is ill and has been in an area where SARS is spreading locally. Although unlikely, it is possible that someone working with the live SARS virus in a laboratory may contract the disease. The health effects of SARS may be more severe for people who are older or have an underlying medical condition.

How SARS is Diagnosed

The symptoms of SARS resemble those of many other respiratory infections, such as influenza. This means that doctors are not able to diagnose SARS on the basis of symptoms alone. They are using the following criteria to determine who needs to be investigated further.

People at risk for developing SARS (based on the risk factors described above), who have:

- early clinical signs of SARS, including fever



over 38 degrees Celsius and cough or breathing difficulty, AND

- a chest X-ray that shows a condition consistent with SARS infection, such as pneumonia or respiratory distress syndrome (RDS), AND
- no other cause of illness is found

There is no quick test for SARS. If you have symptoms that could be SARS, your doctor or health care professional will decide how to manage your case, including whether you should be isolated, based on your specific symptoms and risk factors for contracting SARS. If necessary, your doctor will perform specific tests for the SARS virus.

How SARS is Treated

At the moment, there is no vaccine or cure for SARS. Patients with SARS receive the same treatment given to any patient with serious pneumonia when the suspected cause of illness is a virus. This may include supportive treatment, such as oxygen, as needed. Scientists around the world are testing various drugs for treating SARS, including antiviral drugs that may be effective against the virus.

SARS and Influenza Vaccinations (Flu Shots)

A flu shot does not offer any protection against SARS. The primary reason to get a flu shot is to protect yourself against health effects from flu. However, flu shots will help to reduce the number of severe cases of flu coming to emergency departments and may help to reduce the number of false alarms about SARS. By reducing the number of suspicious illnesses that need extensive investigation, flu shots could also help ensure that a true outbreak of SARS would be detected more quickly.

Minimizing Your Risk

The following precautions will help to minimize the risk of SARS, not only for you and your family, but also for others:

- wash your hands regularly and thoroughly for at least 20 seconds using soap and warm water
- if traveling, check the Health Canada travel advisories for information about regions affected by SARS
- refrain from donating blood for at least 21 days if you have been in a region outside Canada currently affected by SARS, or have been in a site identified by public health authorities as at-risk for SARS
- call ahead to your health care provider to seek advice if you feel you have the symptoms of SARS

Above all, remain calm yet alert. Remember, there is no evidence of SARS spreading within the general community in Canada.

Health Canada's Role

The Government of Canada is taking all of the necessary precautions to protect the health and safety of Canadians in the fight against SARS. At Health Canada, there is a high level of activity in the following key areas: surveillance, research, laboratory diagnosis, public health and hospital infection control, travel and emergency response, and communications and public awareness. Some of these activities include:

- surveillance and monitoring
- developing guidelines to assist health services providers
- developing diagnostic tests for SARS
- Quarantine Services at major Canadian international airports
- coordination and collaboration with provincial and territorial partners

- consultation with international partners, including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- research on the SARS virus, vaccines and treatments.

Health Canada has also set up a SARS Web site, and has established a toll-free number so Canadians can get direct answers to their questions about SARS.

Need More Info?

Visit Health Canada's SARS Web site for the latest information on the domestic situation and Health Canada's activities at:
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/sars-sras/index.html>
or call Health Canada's toll-free SARS Information line at:
1-800-454-8302

The latest Health Canada travel advisories at:
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/tmp-pmv/index.html>

To see Health Canada's Infection Control Guidelines for people whose occupations may put them at increased risk for exposure to SARS at:
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/sars-sras/prof_e.html

For an update on the international situation, visit the World Health Organization at:
<http://www.who.int/csr/sars/en/>

For more information on SARS see the Centre for Disease Control at:
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars/>

For additional articles go to the It's Your Health Web site at:
www.healthcanada.ca/iyh
You can also call (613) 957-2991