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COVID-19: what you need to know about coronavirus

News of a new virus spreading throughout China and parts of Asia has authorities on high alert to identify and isolate any new cases. So what do you need to know about this new virus – and should you be worried?

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The new virus, which had never been seen before, is causing severe lung disease in China, with cases also confirmed in South Korea, [Thailand](#) and Japan among recent travellers to China. Thus far, six people are known to have died from the virus, with almost three hundred cases confirmed. UK experts suggest that this is an underestimate, with the real number of cases [closer to 1,700](#). Some people with mild forms of the virus may not be detected at all.

Update: as of 27 January, the number of dead has risen to 81 with more than 3,000 cases confirmed. Cases have been confirmed in countries around the world including the United States, France and Australia among recent travellers to Wuhan. Planes and trains into and out of Wuhan and buses, subways and ferries in the city have been suspended in an effort to control the virus. The city is currently on lockdown. Other cities in China have cancelled Chinese New Year celebrations and extended school and work holidays to minimise the risk of transmission.

The risk to people in the UK remains low, with no cases yet confirmed. Public Health England has issued **interim guidance** for clinicians to help them identify and isolate any potential cases.

It's been established that the mystery illness is caused by a coronavirus, part of a group of viruses, six – now seven – of which have been known to be able to infect humans. One type of coronavirus causes [severe acute respiratory syndrome](#) (SARS) which is why concern about this outbreak has been so high. In the SARS pandemic originating in China in the early 2000s, 774 of the 8,098 people infected died.

The outbreak has been pinpointed to the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan, China, which was selling live animals and exotic meats as well as seafood. The virus was first documented in December 2019. The majority of confirmed cases were linked to the market, but there have now been several cases among people who had no connection to the market. Scientists have now confirmed that the virus can be spread person-to-person and not just from animals. Experts are concerned that the virus will spread further and more quickly as a result.

The World Health Organization held crisis talks on Wednesday 22 January to announce that it would not yet declare this a global public health emergency, although it has declared an emergency within China.

Signs and symptoms

Coronaviruses can cause mild illnesses like the common cold but can also lead to severe respiratory diseases, including [Middle East respiratory syndrome](#) (MERS) and SARS. Common signs of coronavirus infections include:

- Respiratory (breathing) symptoms including [shortness of breath](#) and breathing difficulties.
- [Fever](#) (high temperature).
- [Cough](#).

In severe cases, coronaviruses can cause:

- [Pneumonia](#).
- Kidney failure.
- Death.

In this new virus, those who have contracted it have suffered coughs, fever and breathing difficulties, later developing pneumonia. Because it's a virus, [antibiotics](#) are useless in treating the infection. Antivirals can be used but they will only reduce symptoms, not cure them.

From what has been seen of the new virus so far, it is most closely related to the coronavirus which causes SARS. There have been no reported cases of SARS since 2004. Its symptoms - which could be similar to symptoms of the new virus - include:

- [Flu-like symptoms](#).
- High temperature (fever) or feeling cold (chills).
- Feeling very [tired](#).
- [Loss of appetite](#).
- Aching muscles.
- Feeling generally unwell.
- Sometimes, [diarrhoea](#).

After three to seven days of these symptoms, patients will develop a dry cough, fever and breathlessness which ranges from mild to severe.

Those with suspected coronavirus may be given breathing support and fluids to stabilise them.

Thus far, the survival and recovery of patients has largely depended on each individual's existing [immune system](#). The four people who have been killed by the virus so far were reported to have already been unwell or elderly and so less able to fight off infection.

Is it safe to travel to China?

It's the busiest time of year for tourism in China. At the end of January, millions of people will travel to China to celebrate the Chinese New Year. But is it safe to travel?

Current advice from Public Health England (PHE) is that the risk to people visiting China is low. "Based on the available evidence, the risk to travellers to Wuhan from this disease is low and we are not advising them to change their plans," says Dr Nick Phin, National Infection Service Deputy Director at PHE.

PHE advises travellers to Wuhan to take precautions like [washing hands properly](#) and practising good personal hygiene such as:

- Covering your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing.
- Where possible, avoiding people who are showing signs of respiratory illness such as [sneezing](#) and coughing.
- Avoiding contact with birds and animals in the area.
- Ensuring that meat and eggs are thoroughly cooked before eating.

As the virus is new, a vaccine does not yet exist to protect against the virus.

As for the UK population, PHE also advises that the risk is very low. "The UK has robust arrangements to manage emerging diseases and we can draw on our experience of developing pioneering diagnostic tests in humans for the coronaviruses - 'SARS' and 'MERS'," explains Phin.

Some airports around the world, including in Asia, Australia and the US, have started screening incoming passengers from central China to minimise the spread of the virus internationally.

Currently, no similar screening is taking place at UK airports. But, as you should any time you travel, check the latest advice from the World Health Organization or PHE before you depart to keep yourself safe and well.

What should I do if I think I have coronavirus?

If you have been to the Wuhan region recently and are concerned about problems with breathing, speak with a healthcare professional, says PHE. The virus appears to develop very quickly - within days rather than weeks - and so travellers who visited China several weeks ago and have not had symptoms should not worry.

"Travellers should seek medical attention if they develop respiratory symptoms within 14 days of visiting Wuhan, informing their health service prior to their attendance about their recent travel to the city," says Phin.

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