

#Coronavirus

WWW.WHO.INT

Naming the coronavirus disease (COVID-2019) and the virus that causes it

Official names have been announced for the virus responsible for COVID-19 (previously known as “2019 novel coronavirus”) and the disease it causes. The official names are:

Disease:

coronavirus disease
(COVID-19)

Virus:

severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2(SARS-CoV-2)

Why do the virus and the disease have different names?

Viruses, and the diseases they cause, often have different names. For example, HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. People often know the name of a disease, such as measles, but not the name of the virus that causes it (rubeola). There are different processes, and purposes, for naming viruses and diseases.

Viruses are named based on their genetic structure to facilitate the development of diagnostic tests, vaccines and medicines. Virologists and the wider scientific community do this work, so viruses are named by the [International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses](#) (ICTV).

Diseases are named to enable discussion on disease prevention, spread, transmissibility, severity and treatment. Human disease preparedness and response is WHO’s role, so diseases are officially named by WHO in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD).

ICTV announced “severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)” as the name of the new virus on 11 February 2020. This name was chosen because the virus is genetically related to the coronavirus responsible for the SARS outbreak of 2003. While related, the two viruses are different.

WHO announced “COVID-19” as the name of this new disease on 11 February 2020, following guidelines previously developed with the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

WHO and ICTV were in communication about the naming of both the virus and the disease.

What name does WHO use for the virus?

From a risk communications perspective, using the name SARS can have unintended consequences in terms of creating unnecessary fear for some populations, especially in Asia which was worst affected by the SARS outbreak in 2003.

For that reason and others, WHO has begun referring to the virus as “the virus responsible for COVID-19” or “the COVID-19 virus” when communicating with the public. Neither of these designations are intended as replacements for the official name of the virus as agreed by the ICTV.

Material published before the virus was officially named will not be updated unless necessary in order to avoid confusion.

WHAT IS A CRONAVIRUS?

Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as [Middle East Respiratory Syndrome \(MERS-CoV\)](#) and [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome \(SARS-CoV\)](#). A novel coronavirus (nCoV) is a new strain that has not been previously identified in humans.

Coronaviruses are zoonotic, meaning they are transmitted between animals and people. Detailed investigations found that SARS-CoV was transmitted from civet cats to humans and MERS-CoV from dromedary camels to humans. Several known coronaviruses are circulating in animals that have not yet infected humans.

Common signs of infection include respiratory symptoms, fever, cough, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties. In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure and even death.

Standard recommendations to prevent infection spread include regular hand washing, covering mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing, thoroughly cooking meat and eggs. Avoid close contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing and sneezing.

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 detected before the outbreak was reported in Wuhan, China in December 2019.

Is the new virus the same as SARS?

No, 2019-nCoV 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 2019-nCoV 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) appear to be more vulnerable to becoming severely ill with the virus

Can humans become infected with the 2019-nCoV from an animal source?

Detailed investigations found that SARS-CoV was transmitted from civet cats to humans in China in 2002 and MERS-CoV from dromedary camels to humans in Saudi Arabia in 2012. Several known coronaviruses are circulating in animals that have not yet infected humans. As surveillance improves around the world, more coronaviruses are likely to be identified

The animal source of the 2019-nCoV has not yet been identified. This does not mean you can catch 2019-nCoV from any animal or from your pet. It’s likely that an animal source from a live animal market in China was responsible for some of the first reported human infections. To protect yourself, when visiting live animal markets, avoid direct unprotected contact with live animals and surfaces in contact with animals.

The consumption of raw or undercooked animal products should be avoided. Raw meat, milk or animal organs should be handled with care, to avoid cross-contamination with uncooked foods, as per good food safety practices.

Can I catch 2019-nCoV from my pet?

No, at present there is no evidence that companion animals or pets such as cats and dogs have been infected or have spread 2019-nCoV.

Can the 2019-nCoV be transmitted from person to person?

Yes, the 2019-nCoV 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 health care center.

What can I do to protect myself?

Wash your hands frequently

Wash your hands frequently with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub if your hands are not visibly dirty.

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

Practice respiratory hygiene

When coughing and sneezing, cover mouth and nose with flexed elbow or tissue – discard tissue immediately into a closed bin and clean your hands with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water.

Why? Covering your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing prevent the spread of germs and viruses. If you sneeze or cough into your hands, you may contaminate objects or people that you touch.

Maintain social distancing

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 2019-nCoV, 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 health care provider if you have traveled in an area in China where 2019-nCoV has been reported, or if you have been in close contact with someone with who has traveled 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, 2019-nCoV could be one of them.

If you have mild respiratory symptoms and no travel history to or within China

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.

As a general precaution, practice general hygiene measures when visiting live animal markets, wet markets or animal product markets

Ensure regular hand washing with soap and potable water after touching animals and animal products; avoid touching eyes, nose or mouth with hands; and avoid contact with sick animals or spoiled animal products. Strictly avoid any contact with other animals in the market (e.g., stray cats and dogs, rodents, birds, bats). Avoid contact with potentially contaminated animal waste or fluids on the soil or structures of shops and market facilities.

Avoid consumption of raw or undercooked animal products

Handle raw meat, milk or animal organs with care, to avoid cross-contamination with uncooked foods, as per good food safety practices.

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.

WHO advises on rational use of medical masks thus avoiding unnecessary wastage of precious resources and potential misuse of masks ([see Advice on the use of masks](#)). This means using masks only if you have respiratory symptoms (coughing or sneezing), have suspected 2019-nCoV infection with mild symptoms or are caring for someone with suspected 2019-nCoV infection. A suspected 2019-nCoV infection is linked to travel in an area in China where 2019-nCoV has been reported, or close contact with someone who has traveled from China and has respiratory symptoms.

How to put on, use, take of and dispose of a mask

1. Before putting on a mask, wash hands with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water

2. Cover mouth and nose with mask and make sure there are no gaps between your face and the mask
3. Avoid touching the mask while using it; if you do, clean your hands with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water
4. Replace the mask with a new one as soon as it is damp and do not re-use single-use masks
5. To remove the mask: remove it from behind (do not touch the front of mask); discard immediately in a closed bin; wash hands with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water

Who can catch this virus?

People living or travelling in an area where the 2019-nCoV virus is circulating may be at risk of infection. At present, 2019-nCoV 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 traveled from China or who have been living or working closely with those travellers, such as family members, co-workers or medical professionals caring for a patient before they knew the patient was infected with 2019-nCoV.

Health workers caring for persons who are sick with 2019-nCoV are at higher risk and must protect themselves with appropriate infection prevention and control procedures .

WHO is continuously monitoring the epidemiology of this outbreak to better understand where the virus is circulating and how people can protect themselves from infection. For more information, see WHO's latest situation reports.

Who is at risk of developing severe illness?

While we still need to learn more about how 2019-nCoV 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 the 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 alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water.

How long does the virus survive on surfaces?

It is still not known how long the 2019-nCoV virus survives on surfaces, although preliminary information suggests the virus may survive a few hours or more. Simple disinfectants can kill the virus making it no longer possible to infect people.

What's the difference between illness caused by 2019-nCoV, the flu or a cold?

People with 2019-nCoV infection, the flu, or a cold 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 2019-nCoV.

As always, WHO recommends that people who have cough, fever and difficulty breathing should seek medical care early. Patients should inform health care providers if they have travelled in the 14 days before they developed symptoms, or if they have been in close contact with someone who has been sick with respiratory symptoms.

How long is the incubation period?

The incubation period is the time between infection and the onset of clinical symptoms of disease. Current estimates of the incubation period range from 1-12.5 days with median estimates of 5-6 days. These estimates will be refined as more data become available. Based on information from other coronavirus diseases, such as MERS and SARS, the incubation period of 2019-nCoV could be up to 14 days. WHO recommends that the follow-up of contacts of confirmed cases is 14 days.

Can 2019-nCoV be caught from a person who presents no symptoms?

Understanding the time when infected patients may spread the virus to others is critical for control efforts. Detailed medical information from people infected is needed to determine the infectious period of 2019-nCoV. According to recent reports, it may be possible that people infected with 2019-nCoV 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.

Has WHO changed its advice on health protection?

No, our advice is the same. WHO has issued [advice to people](#) on how to protect themselves from 2019-nCoV infection, as for any virus that spreads via the respiratory route.

In addition, it is vitally important in health care settings that health care workers are able to protect themselves from infection. WHO guidance on infection prevention and control measures in health care facilities is [here](#).

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 2019-nCoV?

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 2019-nCoV?

To date, there is no specific medicine recommended to prevent or treat the novel coronavirus. However, those infected with 2019-nCoV should receive appropriate care to relieve and treat symptoms, and those with severe illness should receive optimized supportive care. Some specific treatments are under investigation and will be tested through clinical trials. WHO is helping to coordinate efforts to develop medicines to treat nCoV with a range of partners.

If you want to protect yourself from getting infected with the new coronavirus, you should maintain basic hand and respiratory hygiene, and safe food practices and avoiding close contact, when possible, with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing and sneezing. The following measures **ARE NOT** specifically recommended as 2019-nCoV remedies as they are not effective to protect yourself and can be even harmful:

- Taking vitamin C
- Smoking
- Drinking tradition herbal teas
- Wearing multiple masks to maximize protection
- Taking self-medication such as antibiotics

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 health care provider.

Does the new coronavirus spread through aerosols?

Issues relating to aerosol often come up when people want to know how to protect themselves from respiratory diseases. When people sneeze or cough, they may spray big droplets but the droplets do not stay suspended in the air for long. They fall. Health care procedures like intubation can spray small droplets into the air. Bigger droplets fall quickly. Smaller ones fall less quickly.

We know about environmental contamination for MERS-CoV and finding RNA in air filtration systems (but not the live virus). However, for the new coronavirus, we still need to see the data and understand how transmission has been assessed.

What are the official names of the disease and the virus that causes it?

WHO announced “COVID-19” as the name of this disease on 11 February 2020, following guidelines previously developed with the World Organisation for Animal Health and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

The International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) announced “severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)” as the name of the new virus on 11 February 2020. This name was chosen because the virus is genetically related to the coronavirus responsible for the SARS outbreak of 2003. While related, the two viruses are different.

From a risk communications perspective, using the name SARS can have unintended consequences in terms of creating unnecessary fear for some populations, especially in Asia which was worst affected by the SARS outbreak in 2003.

For that reason and others, WHO has begun referring to the virus as “the virus responsible for COVID-19” or “the COVID-19 virus” when communicating with the public. Neither of these designations are intended as replacements for the official name of the virus as agreed by the ICTV.