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What is the novel coronavirus and how can I protect myself?

Answer From Pritish K. Tosh, M.D.

A new virus being called the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) has been identified as the cause of a respiratory illness outbreak first identified in China. The virus is a type of coronavirus — a family of viruses that includes respiratory illnesses such as the common cold, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS).

Because this virus is so new, not much is known about it yet. Public health groups, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are investigating. Check their websites for updates.

The new coronavirus appears to be spreading from person-to-person. It may be spread by respiratory droplets when someone coughs or sneezes. But it's unclear exactly how it spreads or how contagious it is, and research is ongoing. Symptoms of the new coronavirus can be mild to severe and include a fever, cough and shortness of breath. They may appear two to 14 days after exposure. A coronavirus vaccine isn't currently available.

WHO and CDC recommend that you take the usual precautions to help prevent the spread of respiratory viruses:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Cover your mouth and nose with your elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth if your hands aren't clean.
- Avoid close contact with anyone who is sick.
- Clean surfaces you often touch.
- Stay home from work, school and public areas if you're sick.

In addition to the above, WHO recommends these steps:

- Check with your doctor if you have a fever, cough and difficulty breathing, and tell him or her about any recent travels.
- Avoid eating raw meat or animal organs.
- If you're visiting live markets in areas that have recently had novel coronavirus cases, avoid contact with live animals and surfaces they may have touched.

If you're planning to travel internationally, first check the CDC and WHO websites for updates and advice. Also look for any travel advisories that may be in place where you plan to travel.

With

Pritish K. Tosh, M.D.

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