

SARS Questions and Answers: The Illness

What is SARS?

Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) is a respiratory illness. SARS is caused by a previously unrecognized coronavirus called SARS-associated coronavirus (SARS-CoV). For additional information, check the websites of the Centers For Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars and the World Health Organization (WHO) at www.who.int/csr/sars/en/.

What are the symptoms and signs of SARS?

The illness usually begins with a fever (measured temperature greater than 100.4°F [$>38.0^{\circ}\text{C}$]). The fever is sometimes associated with chills or other symptoms, including headache, general feeling of discomfort and body aches. Some people also experience mild respiratory symptoms at the outset. Diarrhea is seen in approximately 10% to 20% of patients.

After 2 to 7 days, SARS patients may develop a dry, nonproductive cough that might be accompanied by or progress to the point where insufficient oxygen is getting to the blood. Most patients develop pneumonia.

If I were exposed to SARS, how long would it take for me to become sick?

The time between exposure to SARS-CoV and the onset of symptoms is called the "incubation period." The incubation period for SARS is typically 2 to 7 days; however, isolated reports have suggested an incubation period as long as 10 to 14 days. (In a very small proportion of cases, incubation periods of up to 14 days have been reported.) The illness usually begins with a fever ($>100.4^{\circ}\text{F}$ [$>38.0^{\circ}\text{C}$]) (see signs and symptoms, above).

What medical treatment is recommended for patients with SARS?

CDC currently recommends that patients with SARS receive the same treatment that would be used for any patient with serious community-acquired pneumonia. (SARS is being tested against antiviral drugs to see if an effective treatment can be found.)

How is SARS spread?

The primary way that we understand SARS spreads is by close person-to-person contact. Potential ways in which SARS can be spread include touching the skin of other people or objects that are contaminated with infectious droplets and then touching your eye(s), nose, or mouth. This can happen when someone who is sick with SARS coughs or sneezes droplets onto themselves, other people, or nearby surfaces. It also is possible that SARS can be spread more broadly through the air or by other ways that currently are not known.

What does "close contact" mean?

Close contact might occur when between people live together in the same household or if someone is providing care to a SARS patient. Examples include kissing or embracing, sharing eating or drinking utensils, close conversation (within 3 feet), physical examination, and any other direct physical contact between people. Close contact does not include activities such as walking by a person or sitting across a waiting room or office for a brief period of time.

How can I protect myself against SARS?

There are some common-sense measures that you can take to prevent the spread of SARS that apply to many infectious diseases. The most important is frequent hand washing with soap and water or use of alcohol-based hand rubs (See www.cdc.gov/handhygiene/). In addition, you should avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unclean hands and encourage people around you to cover their nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.

Who is most at risk of contracting SARS?

Most of the U.S. cases of SARS have occurred among travelers returning to the United States from other parts of the world affected by SARS. There have been very few cases as a result of spread to close contacts, such as family members and health care workers. Currently, there is no evidence that SARS is spreading more widely in the community in the United States.