

Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I love your site, it is my source for information on all kinds of things. I have a question, can you tell me more about SARS? Is it really that dangerous? Should I be concerned?

Thanks.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Thanks for the props! And glad to be of service.

SARS is a serious health concern, and it can be dangerous if you come into contact with it. However, you don't necessarily need to be concerned. The media grasped onto the sensationalized story of SARS because of its rapid spread made possible by the relatively new phenomenon of extensive and frequent world travel and the fast rate of transmission. Luckily the virus was quickly isolated and contained only months after its initial out-break.

SARS, which is an acronym for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, is a contagious and sometimes fatal respiratory illness that is actually a severe form of pneumonia. It is caused by a strain of the coronavirus, which is also the family of viruses that causes the common cold. SARS first appeared in China in 2002, and within six weeks had spread worldwide. Within a month and a half, 8,000 people were infected and 800 had died. SARS dramatically taught us how rapidly world travel can spread disease, but it also showed us how well our global health system can work together to handle a new threat. By June 2003, the epidemic had pretty much been quelled.

In terms of being concerned, if you're well-educated about the virus and know how to protect yourself there's no need to worry. SARS usually begins with a fever of 100.4 degrees or higher, as well as classic flu symptoms like chills, sore muscles, and headache, within the first week of infection. After the first week, more specific symptoms can appear, like a dry cough or severe pneumonia. Between 10 percent and 20 percent of people with SARS become progressively worse and develop breathing problems, in some cases severely enough that they require a mechanical respirator to breathe. SARS can be fatal, due to respiratory, heart, and liver failure.

There are several laboratory tests that can detect the virus if someone suspects they've been

infected. Doctors can test blood or tissue to see if the SARS pathogen is present. However, there is not a specific medicine that has been found to treat SARS. Patients will often take a combination of antiviral drugs normally used to treat HIV/AIDS, which can help avert serious complications and deaths from SARS.

Most respiratory illness, including SARS, spread through droplets that enter the air when someone with the disease coughs, sneezes, or talks. The virus can also spread through contaminated objects like doorknobs, subway poles, and elevator buttons. Some also believe that SARS, as well as many other viruses, can be spread through the air vents on airplanes. Experts say that it might be best to turn these vents off and to wash hands during and after the flight. Generally, those at greatest risk of contracting SARS are the people who work with or care for someone who's infected. SARS patients are most contagious while they are experiencing active symptoms and for ten days after the symptoms cease. While several types of vaccines for SARS are being worked on, none are currently perfected. Until a vaccine is available, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends taking precautions if you are in a place that has an outbreak of SARS, or are in contact with someone infected with SARS. Some examples of preventative actions are:

- Frequently washing your hands with soap and hot water.
- Using a tissue instead of your hands to rub your eyes or nose.
- Wearing disposable gloves if you have contact with an infected person's body fluids or feces.
- Wearing a surgical mask and glasses when you're in the same room as a person with SARS.
- If you have a compromised immune system, then avoid exposure to those infected with SARS.

It is recommended to follow these protocol for at least 10 days after signs and symptoms have disappeared.

For more detailed, continually updated information on SARS, you can check out the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's SARS information page](#) [2] and the [World Health Organization's SARS information page](#) [3]. You should also know that the WHO has stopped reporting daily statistics regarding infections, so it seems as though it has been contained.

Alice!

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