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[Home](#) > Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)

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! Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) is a contagious respiratory illness that may lead to complications such as trouble breathing and pneumonia and can sometimes be fatal. It's caused by a type of coronavirus, which is the family of viruses that include the common cold. The virus gained notoriety due to its fast rate of transmission and the relatively new phenomenon of extensive and frequent world travel. This virus first appeared in China in 2002, and within six weeks had spread worldwide to over 25 countries. Within a month and a half, thousands of people were infected and almost 800 had died. SARS was a dramatic lesson on how world travel can rapidly spread disease, while also being a testament to how the global health system is equipped to work together and handle a new threat. The proof: the virus was quickly isolated and contained only months after its initial outbreak.

While the numbers of individuals impacted by SARS may seem overwhelming, knowing about it and how to protect yourself can help to reduce feelings of worry. Symptoms usually begin within the first week of infection and include a fever of 100.5 degrees Fahrenheit or higher, as well as classic flu symptoms (think chills, sore muscles, and headache). After the first week, more specific symptoms and secondary infections may appear, such as a dry cough or severe pneumonia. In some cases, SARS may become progressively worse, developing into breathing problems that require a mechanical ventilator to breathe. In these situations, it may be fatal, due to respiratory, heart, and liver failure. These risks are highest among individuals who are older than 60 or have some underlying medical conditions such as diabetes or hepatitis.

There are several laboratory tests that can detect the virus if health care providers suspect someone has been infected. They may test blood or tissue to see if the SARS pathogen is

present. Unfortunately, even if the virus is detected, there isn't a specific medicine available to treat the virus. That being said, people who are infected are often given supportive therapy, such as oxygen, to help avert complications and deaths from SARS.

Most respiratory illnesses, including SARS, spread through droplets that enter the air when someone with the disease coughs, sneezes, or talks. The virus may also spread through contaminated objects such as doorknobs, subway poles, and elevator buttons. Generally, those at greatest risk of contracting SARS are the people who work with or care for someone who's infected. Patients are most contagious while they're experiencing active symptoms and for ten days after the symptoms cease. While several types of vaccines are in development, none are currently on the market for consumer use. Until a vaccine is available, recommended precautions if you're in a place that has an outbreak of SARS or are in contact with someone infected include:

- Frequently [washing your hands](#) [2] 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 feces or fluids from a person who has been infected with SARS
- Wearing a surgical mask and glasses when you're in the same room as a person who is infected
- If you have a compromised immune system, try to avoid exposure to those who are infected

It's suggested to follow these precautions for at least ten days after signs and symptoms of SARS have disappeared.

For more detailed information on this virus, check out the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [SARS information page](#) [3] and the World Health Organization (WHO) [SARS information page](#) [4]. It's also worth noting that the WHO has stopped reporting daily statistics regarding infections, indicating that the SARS outbreak has continued to be contained.

Alice!

Category:

[General Health](#) [5]

[Colds & Flu](#) [6]

Related questions

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[Avian flu — What is it? Is there a vaccine?](#) [9]

[Should I get a flu shot?](#) [10]

Resources

[Medical Services \(Morningside\)](#) [11]

[Medical Services \(CUIMC\)](#) [12]

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Footer menu

- ▼ Contact Alice!
 - Content Use
 - Media Inquiries
 - Comments & Corrections
- ▼ Syndication & Licensing
 - Licensing Q&As
 - Get Alice! on Your Website
 - Full Site Syndication
 - Link to Go Ask Alice!

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Links

- [1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/severe-acute-respiratory-syndrome-sars-0>
- [2] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/how-to-wash-hands>
- [3] <http://www.cdc.gov/sars/index.html>
- [4] <http://www.who.int/csr/sars/en>
- [5] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/general-health>
- [6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/colds-flu>
- [7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19>
- [8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/do-i-have-cold-or-flu>
- [9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/avian-flu-%E2%80%94-what-it-there-vaccine-0>
- [10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/should-i-get-flu-shot-1>
- [11] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-morningside>
- [12] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-cuimc>