

SARS: What is it and how to protect yourself

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If you've been watching the news or reading the papers, you have heard of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

SARS is a respiratory illness that has been plaguing Asia with thousands infected and has entered North America and Europe with fewer reported cases. As of June 6, the World Health Organization reported 1,122 cases in China, 338 in Taiwan, 114 in Hong Kong, one in Russia, 10 in Singapore, one in France, one in Germany, 68 in Canada and 33 in the U.S.

With summer rapidly approaching and families planning vacations, it is important to understand what SARS is and what you can do to protect yourself and family members.

The symptoms of SARS are typically flu-like. Usually there is a fever greater than 100.4 F accompanied with headache, body aches, and mild respiratory problems. SARS patients may have trouble breathing and may develop a dry cough after two to seven days.

SARS appears to be spread by close person-to-person contact and through contact with material contaminated with infectious

respiratory secretions. Most new SARS cases involved persons living with or caring for a person with the illness.

Most SARS cases in the United States and Canada involved people returning to these countries after traveling to areas where SARS is prevalent as well as caretakers, family members, or healthcare workers.

In the military community, SARS could pose a significant readiness risk. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has advised that all non-essential travel to regions where SARS is prevalent be postponed until further notice. These regions include travel to mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. If you must travel to these areas, it is extremely important to

wash your hands frequently and avoid close contact with large crowds of people to minimize the risk of infection.

If you or people you come in close contact with have recently returned from these areas and develop symptoms, visit your health-care provider immediately. Inform them of your travel to aid them in a diagnosis.

The CDC and the World Health Organization have developed infection control recommendations for family members caring for SARS patients in the household, for healthcare workers, and for management of exposures to SARS in health-care and other institutional settings. Visit www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars or call (888) 246-2675 for more information.