

SARS: Keep Current and Don't Panic

In recent weeks, we've all seen the news stories about SARS with images of people wearing masks on planes arriving from Asia and in the streets of China. We've heard reports of American students and workers returning home from China and Hong Kong. And earlier this month, President Bush issued an executive order putting SARS on a list of diseases for which people can be quarantined (<<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars/executiveorder040403.htm>>).

What does it all mean?

Here are some basic facts: SARS, which is short for severe acute respiratory syndrome, is a type of pneumonia. It is a coronavirus; one of a family of viruses that cause mild to moderate upper-respiratory illnesses such as the common cold. Worldwide about 3,000 people have been infected by SARS, and just over 100 people have died of it. In the United States to date, there have been only 150 suspected SARS cases and no deaths.

So, there's no need to panic. Instead, get informed. The Internet is here to help, with reliable resources and current information all you have to do is look in the right places.

As fast as you can say SARS, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) put up a Web site with the basic information on SARS for the public and physicians (<<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars/>>). The CDC has also posted a list of frequently asked questions (<<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars/faq.htm>>) on the symptoms and cause of SARS.

The World Health Organization (WHO) is on the case as well, offering the latest statistics on cases, spread of the infection and advisories on SARS (<<http://www.who.int/csr/sars/en/>>).

To contain the spread of SARS, the CDC urges people to postpone trips to China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Hanoi, Vietnam. These areas are where the bulk of SARS cases and SARS-related deaths have occurred. You can find travel alert and advisory information from the CDC (<http://www.cdc.gov/travel/other/acute_resp_syn_multi.htm>)

The U.S. State Department also provides resources for American travelers in the event of a medical emergency in another country (<<http://www.travel.state.gov/medical.html>>). There you'll even find lists of air ambulance and medical evacuation services you can contact in an emergency.

While the threat of SARS can be scary, simply knowing where to find current and accurate information about the illness can help calm your fears.

- Modified from information on AAFP Electronic News Service.