What you should know about symptoms of severe acute respiratory syndrome infection

Severe acute respiratory syndrome, commonly referred to as SARS, is a respiratory illness that has recently been reported in Asia, North America and Europe. The Hanford Environmental Health Foundation presents the following information about this relatively new and sometimes fatal illness.

The illness usually begins with a fever greater than 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit. 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 onset of the illness. After two to seven days, SARS patients may develop a dry, nonproductive cough that might be accompanied by, or progress to the point of, insufficient oxygen getting to the blood. In 10 to 20 percent of cases, the patient will require very intensive hospital care.

The incubation period (time from exposure to the onset of illness) for SARS is typically two to seven days; however, isolated reports have suggested an incubation period as long as 10 days.

SARS is spread through droplet transmission; in other words, when someone sick with SARS coughs or sneezes droplets into the air, someone else can breathe them in and become infected. It is also possible that SARS can be transmitted more broadly through the air or from objects that have become contaminated. It is believed that people are most likely to be infectious when they have symptoms such as fever or cough.

The treatment is the same as for any patient with a serious community-acquired atypical pneumonia of an unknown cause.

Cases of SARS continue to be reported primarily among people who have had direct close contact with an infected person, such as those sharing a household with a SARS patient and health-care workers who did not use infection-control procedures while caring for a SARS patient.

SARS is caused by a virus that is similar to the type that causes mild to moderate upper-respiratory illness in humans. It is unknown why the virus that causes SARS is more dangerous, but it is being studied.

There is no test available yet for SARS; however, some research that is promising in detecting antibodies to the causative virus is under way.

If you have traveled to an area where SARS is occurring, you may be concerned that you have the illness. If you feel well and have no symptoms typical of the illness, there is no test that a medical provider can perform to reassure you that you will not become ill. If 10 days have passed since your return home, you likely will not acquire the illness.

However, if you become ill with a fever of over 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit and you develop a cough and difficulty in breathing, you should immediately consult a health-care provider. Do not wait to see a health-care provider if you experience these symptoms.

To help your health-care provider make a diagnosis, tell him or her about any recent travel to regions where cases of SARS have been reported and whether you were in contact with someone who had these symptoms.

At this time there are no travel restrictions that are directly related to SARS. However, a travel advisory recommends that individuals who are planning nonessential or elective travel to mainland China, Hong Kong, Hanoi, Vietnam or Singapore may wish to postpone their trips until further notice. ■