Coronavirus: what you need to know

23 January 2020

At PHE we respond to around 10,000 disease outbreaks and health emergencies every year both at home and abroad, ranging from e-coli, legionnaires and TB through to emerging threats such as the outbreak of a novel (new) coronavirus in Wuhan, China.

This is a rapidly evolving situation which we are monitoring carefully but based on the available evidence, the current risk to the UK population is low.

In this blog we’ll answer some of the questions many people have. We’ll update this blog as new information becomes available.

**What is Wuhan novel coronavirus and should I be concerned?**

A coronavirus is a type of virus. As a group, coronaviruses are common across the world.

Typical symptoms of coronavirus include fever and a cough that may progress to a severe pneumonia causing shortness of breath and breathing difficulties.

Generally, coronavirus can cause more severe symptoms in people with weakened immune systems, older people, and those with long term conditions like diabetes, cancer and chronic lung disease.
Wuhan Novel Coronavirus is a new strain of coronavirus first identified in Wuhan City, China. No confirmed cases of Wuhan coronavirus have been detected in the UK and we currently consider the risk to the UK population to be low.

**What is the current risk level to the UK?**

The risk to the UK population has been assessed as low. This has been raised from very low due to current evidence on the ability for the virus to spread between people.

**How do we decide the risk level?**

Several factors are taken into account to determine the risk level including the number of cases, the speed at which new cases are being identified and other information about the virus such as how easily it spreads from person to person.

**Can we stop the virus coming to the UK?**

No system of checks can claim to offer absolute protection because of the incubation period of the virus. Some people might only show symptoms 14 days after exposure to an infected person. Our approach to enhanced monitoring helps us ensure that travellers from Wuhan get the right information about what to do if they become unwell.

Healthcare professionals have also received advice, covering initial detection and investigation of possible cases, infection prevention and control, and clinical diagnostics so they are well prepared to assist anyone who is suspected of having Wuhan novel coronavirus.

The UK is one of the countries outside China to have an assured testing capability test for this disease. If a person is diagnosed with the virus they will be transferred to a national specialist treatment centre. High Consequence Infectious Disease (HCID) treatment centres have the facilities and specialist staff to implement robust infection control measures.

As has already been demonstrated in response to diseases like MERS, Ebola and Monkeypox, Public Health England and the NHS have robust protocols in place to manage cases of imported infections.

**What measures are being taken to protect the UK?**

Public Health England experts are ready to provide advice to travellers arriving from China if they feel unwell. For those travelling back directly from Wuhan, this includes a specialist team who will meet each direct flight to provide advice and support.

China has announced it is restricting flights in and out of Wuhan but if they resumed, the UK would ensure that:
- A broadcast message to passengers is made on the aircraft, to encourage travellers to report their illness;
- Early warnings of any passenger illness from the captain of the aircraft is made in transit. A response (nil or otherwise) will be requested no later than 60 minutes before the actual arrival time.
- We had an isolated area of London Heathrow Terminal 4 for the reception of the aircraft.
- A General Aircraft Declaration (GAD) was made by the captain of the aircraft, prior to passenger disembarkation.
- Support in accordance with current operating procedures by the PHE teams of any self-declaring passenger, and if required the NHS.

**Shouldn't we keep people at the airport until we're sure they're not sick?**

Many people who develop symptoms will get them after leaving the airport and so our priority is providing UK residents and travellers with the latest information to make sure they know what to do if they experience symptoms. The NHS and PHE have an established plan to respond if people contact us to say they have symptoms and have recently travelled to China.

**Why are we not monitoring all flights from China? And, what about people who have transferred from other flights?**

Plans are in place to meet any direct flights from Wuhan as experts believe this is the source of the virus. However, the enhanced monitoring of direct flights will be kept under continuous review and expanded to other Chinese departure points if necessary.

**Can we test people for Wuhan novel coronavirus and how does this work?**

PHE is a world-leader in developing techniques to aid the public health investigation of infectious diseases. The UK is one of the countries outside China to have an assured testing capability test for this disease. It is a complex test which can differentiate this type of coronavirus from any other coronavirus.

**What's the current travel advice?**

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has advised against "all but essential travel" to Wuhan city, Hubei Province.

If you are travelling to Wuhan, you should maintain good hand, respiratory and personal hygiene and should avoid visiting animal and bird markets or people who are ill with respiratory symptoms. Individuals should seek medical attention if they develop respiratory symptoms within 14 days of visiting Wuhan, either in China or on their return to the UK. They should phone ahead before attending any health services and mention their recent travel to the city.

**Should I be doing anything to protect myself if I’m in the UK?**

This is a rapidly evolving situation which we are monitoring carefully but based on the available evidence, the current risk to the UK is low and no confirmed cases of Wuhan coronavirus have been detected in the UK.
NHS and PHE have an established plan to respond quickly and reduce the risk to others if people contact us to say they have symptoms and have recently travelled to China.