

S'pore on alert as mystery pneumonia hits Chinese city

It starts screening all travellers from Wuhan for fever as cases continue to climb there; HK, Taiwan do the same

A mysterious pneumonia outbreak that has left more than 40 people sick in China has prompted airports in Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan to implement fever screening.

The Straits Times understands that passengers arriving on Scoot

Flight TR 121 (codeshare with SilkAir and Singapore Airlines) at 5.30am today, from Wuhan city in China's Hubei province, will be the first to undergo thermal scanning at Changi Airport's Terminal 1.

Passengers coming in from Wuhan will receive a Ministry of

Health travel advisory during the flight to advise them to seek medical attention if they have fever and shortness of breath within two weeks of being in Wuhan.

The information will also be displayed on digital panels in the arrival hall.

For outbound passengers, the advisory will be displayed on digital panels above check-in counters and in the departure hall.

The advisory states, among other things, that those travelling to Wuhan should avoid contact with live animals, including poultry and birds, and avoid consuming raw and undercooked meat. They should also wash their hands frequently.

In Hong Kong, the authorities deployed thermal imaging systems as part of increased fever surveillance at checkpoints, as two more people were hospitalised for suspected viral pneumonia, Bloomberg reported.

Taiwan also implemented similar measures, its Centres for Disease Control reportedly said on Tuesday.

The surveillance comes as the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission has confirmed more cases of the viral pneumonia.

It said yesterday in a statement

that there were 44 patients with "unexplained diagnosis of viral pneumonia" – up from the 27 announced on Tuesday.

Eleven of the patients were critically ill, while the rest were in stable condition. Fever was the main symptom, and a few patients had difficulty breathing, said the commission, which also tracked 121 close contacts.

The authorities are still identifying the cause of the infection, but "influenza, avian influenza, adenovirus infection and other common respiratory diseases have

been excluded", it said, without mentioning severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars).

It added that preliminary investigations showed no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission.

It also confirmed that some cases involved operators in the Wuhan South China Seafood City, which has since been closed.

Hong Kong's Hospital Authority said on its website yesterday that the two new suspected cases, who had been to Wuhan in the past 14 days, were in stable condition.

A preliminary probe showed that they had not been to the Wuhan wet market before the onset of symptoms.

Three other people in Hong Kong were hospitalised earlier, and two have since been discharged.

The Wuhan outbreak has triggered worries about the potential jump of an unknown virus to humans – reminiscent of Sars, which killed almost 800 people from 2002 to 2003.

The World Health Organisation has been in touch with the Chinese government and investigations are under way, though officials cannot yet confirm which pathogen is responsible, Bloomberg quoted spokesman Tarik Jasarevic as saying in Geneva.



No need to avoid Wuhan but take precautions, say experts

Joyce Teo

There is no need to cancel your trip to Wuhan, where a viral disease outbreak has occurred, but do follow the advice from the Ministry of Health (MOH) and monitor the situation there, said Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID).

As of yesterday morning, 44 patients had been hit by the mysterious flu-like virus of "unknown origin", and 11 of them were critically ill, according to the latest statement from the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission. It also said that fever was the main symptom, and a few patients had difficulty breathing.

All cases have been isolated at medical institutions in Wuhan, capital of China's Hubei province.

MOH has advised travellers to Wuhan to monitor their health closely and seek medical attention promptly if they feel unwell, and to inform their doctor of their travel

history. Travellers and the public should also take precautions, including avoiding contact with live animals and with people who show signs of illness. They should also avoid consuming raw and undercooked meat and wash their hands frequently with soap, it added.

Chinese experts are now investigating the outbreak of viral pneumonia, cases of which first surfaced last month, said the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission.

There is the general fear that it could become a major outbreak, though Prof Leo stressed there is no clear information as yet on how the disease will behave or transmit. "Whether or not this virus is completely new, we don't know," she said.

"Today, there are newer techniques of examination in the lab. The lab can run through some of the common viruses... If we cannot pick up the common viruses that cause the common pneumonia, then the antenna should go up... We still have to wait for more answers."

It can take a day to test for common pathogens and longer to find out if it is an uncommon or new one.

Associate Professor Hsu Li Yang, who heads the infectious diseases programme at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said: "There are several hundred outbreaks each year reported to the World Health Organisation – virtually all are from known pathogens."

"Thankfully, truly novel human pathogens are rare. We are getting better at identifying them, and there are a handful each decade."

The ones that have hit Singapore included the Nipah virus in 1997, and the 2002 to 2003 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars).

Nevertheless, Prof Hsu said: "It is good to be cautious – a stance MOH has adopted – but not to be unduly worried at present."

A key point was that so far, the cases all appeared to be linked to the South China Seafood City in Wuhan, and he noted that there had been no reports of human-to-

human transmission.

Professor Paul Tambyah from the department of medicine at the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine said the risk to the public is low if a virus is not easily spread from human to human.

"That was apparently the case with Sars in late 2002. It was only when Sars became more easily spread from human to human that it became a global epidemic," he said.

"That was many months later and probably due to inadequate control when the opportunity first arose in the markets of southern China at the beginning. Hopefully, with the lessons learnt from Sars, that will not happen again."

Prof Leo said that for now, those heading to Wuhan should avoid going to animal markets, and upon returning, see a doctor early if they have a fever or simply do not feel well.

MOH has sent out circulars to doctors to ask them to look out for suspected cases involving people who have returned recently from the area. Prof Tambyah said these circulars have suggested that anyone who has returned from Wuhan in the past two weeks and has symptoms of pneumonia or breathlessness should be promptly evaluated at NCID.

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Chinese city not a popular destination for Singaporeans

Amrita Kaur

Scoot and low-cost Chinese carrier Urumqi Air are among the airlines that fly to Wuhan, capital of China's Hubei province, from Singapore. Scoot flies daily, and Urumqi Air four times a week.

A Scoot spokesman said the airline has kept its employees informed of the situation in Wuhan, including the latest advisory from Singapore's Ministry of Health.

"This is so that they can take the necessary precautions, especially for pilots and cabin crew who are operating flights to and from Wuhan. There are two local staff supporting Scoot's operations in Wuhan who are based there."

Similar to all Scoot employees, they have been advised to monitor their health and seek medical attention promptly if they are unwell," said the spokesman.

Tour agents told The Straits Times that Wuhan is not a

popular tourist destination for Singaporeans.

Ms Alicia Seah, director of public relations and communications at Dynasty Travel, said the city is "not one of its popular destinations" and the company does not offer tour packages there.

"The more popular hot spots are Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou," she said, adding that she hopes the authorities will bring the situation under control.

Chan Brothers Travel offers tour groups to Wuhan, but there are currently none there. Ms Victoria Chong, the agency's marketing communications executive, said: "We are closely monitoring the local situation to assess its continual development. Our next groups are scheduled to depart only in March 2020, during Wuhan's spring season."

She added that tours tended to be more popular during the spring season.

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News analysis

Lessons from Sars will help Singapore tackle virus from China



Salma Khalik

Senior Health Correspondent

For those living in well-connected global cities such as Singapore, it is difficult to stay calm when new and unknown bugs spread pneumonia in Wuhan, China – just a 4½-hour flight away.

So far, 44 people have been affected; 11 are seriously ill. Many people here still remember the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) which hit Singapore hard in 2003.

Sars was a painful chapter. It, too, emerged from China and was brought here by just one person who had been to Hong Kong. It brought two months of fear in its wake, infected 238 people, including medical staff who attended to early victims. Sars killed 33 people here.

It led to the closure of one of Singapore's busiest hospitals, Tan Tock Seng Hospital, to the general public and was estimated to have cost the Singapore economy close to \$1 billion.

That said, it is equally important not to overreact. Especially since the lessons learnt from Sars have strengthened Singapore's defences.

That is why Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), does not think that the outbreak in Wuhan will mirror the impact of Sars.

First, Singapore is much better prepared today than it was in 2003.



A thermal scanner at an aerobridge in Changi Airport monitoring the temperature of air travellers arriving from Mers-affected Middle Eastern countries in May 2014. The airport has already started screening people flying in from Wuhan, China, and doctors have been alerted to the possible importation of a new bug. ST FILE PHOTO

The airport has already started screening people flying in from Wuhan. All doctors have been alerted to the possible importation of a new bug.

So, even if it does come here,

there is a good chance that it can be caught early and isolated.

When a case of monkeypox was identified here last year – brought in by a Nigerian visitor – it was quickly contained and did not spread.

The staff at the NCID are also experienced in dealing with infectious diseases, with many, including Prof Leo herself, having treated Sars victims.

However, Prof Leo said there are

still many unknowns about the new bug in Wuhan, which currently appears to be a pneumonia virus.

"We really do not know the characteristics of the disease at this time," she told The Straits Times.

That is why it is difficult to say if treating the symptoms alone is enough to help those infected.

So far, the new bug appears to be transmitted directly from animal to human. But Prof Leo cautioned: "We should not be too complacent that at the moment it is not (transmitting from) human to human. There is always still the possibility that it could become human to human."

That is an ability that viruses have. They mutate to increase their chances of survival.

But often when that happens, they become less deadly because killing off the host usually means the end of the spread of the virus. Those that spread easily tend to be less virulent.

Also, not all new infectious diseases become a major problem. Every year, a handful of new or re-emerging infectious diseases surface somewhere in the world.

Over the past few years, only a few have been of major concern – such as Ebola, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (Mers) and, of course, Sars.

So, while Prof Leo's advice is "we don't really need to panic", she also added that "we should also not be unconcerned about it".

The drill is straightforward. Those travelling to or from Wuhan need to be aware of the situation. Those with fever, cough or a runny nose should see a doctor and wear a mask in public.

General-practice doctors need to be alert to the symptoms of the disease and flag suspicious cases.

The Ministry of Health and infectious-disease doctors are closely monitoring the situation in China.

Until more is known, it is best to be alert. But life can still go on as normal.

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