Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)

In early 2003, a new infectious respiratory (lung) disease was described in Asia. It soon spread to other areas of the world, including North America. This new disease is called severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). SARS is highly contagious and is spread from person to person.

SARS is a viral illness, as are the common cold and influenza (flu). The type of virus that causes SARS is a coronavirus. Recent scientific studies have shown that some Asian animals carry viruses similar to the virus that causes SARS. These animals may have been the origin of the SARS virus that affects humans. The December 24/31, 2003, issue of JAMA includes several articles about SARS.

SYMPTOMS OF SARS

- Fever
- Cough
- Muscle aches
- Shortness of breath
- Headache
- Malaise (vague sense of feeling ill)

These symptoms also occur in other respiratory illnesses, such as influenza, that are much more common than SARS. The feeling of shortness of breath often does not begin until 3 to 7 days after the start of fever and the other symptoms. However, this symptom in some individuals may progress quickly to extreme shortness of breath and respiratory failure. This may require treatment with oxygen or a ventilator (breathing machine). Elderly persons or those with underlying illnesses such as diabetes or heart disease are more likely to develop respiratory failure due to SARS, and they are more likely to die from SARS if they become ill with the virus.

CONTROL OF SARS

Unlike influenza or some other viral illnesses, there currently are no vaccinations or immunizations to prevent SARS. Doctors and scientists must rely on rapid diagnosis of SARS to prevent it from spreading and infecting other persons. Worldwide travel advisories, alerts, and other communications helped to identify individuals at risk of developing SARS because of exposure to ill persons, either during travel to SARS-affected areas or at home. Quarantines were imposed as a public health measure to stop the spread of SARS. The SARS epidemic of 2003 has ended. It is unclear whether SARS will return in the future.

PROTECTING YOURSELF FROM RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS

- Wash your hands regularly with warm water and soap.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Use a disposable tissue instead of your hands to cover your mouth when you cough, and throw it away immediately after use.
- Follow public health recommendations if you are in the area of an epidemic.

It is important to reduce your risk of contracting influenza, a serious disease with the same early symptoms as SARS, especially during the flu season (late fall and winter). Talk to your doctor about a vaccination (flu shot or nasal spray) to prevent influenza.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
  888/246-2675
  www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars

- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
  www.niaid.nih.gov

- American Lung Association
  800/586-4872
  www.lungusa.org

- World Health Organization
  www.who.int

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on JAMA's Web site at www.jama.com. Many are available in English and Spanish. A Patient Page on colds was published in the May 28, 2003, issue.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, World Health Organization, American Lung Association, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases