Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in Belgium: update

Three suspect cases of SARS and one probable case have been reported in Belgian residents from March 21 up to April 8. After investigation, cases have been discarded so far as another etiology has been identified that can fully explain their symptoms. In three of those cases, laboratory testing has revealed influenza infection. PCR testing for the newly identified coronavirus, which is up to now presumed to be the causative organism of SARS, is currently performed at the virological service of the KUL (Katolieke Universiteit van Leuven). All tests of possible Belgian cases have been found negative so far. In a near future, the virology section of the IPH will also perform this test.

A call centre has been set up by the Federal Public Service (FPS) of Public Health, Food chain safety and Environment and the FPS of Foreign Affairs on April 1 to answer to the questions of the general public regarding SARS. French speaking persons can call the 02/501.40.00 and Dutch speaking ones the 02/501.40.01. This centre is currently functional from 8:30 AM to 6:00 PM. A list of “frequently asked questions” is also available on the website of the FPS of Public Health, Food chain safety and Environment and is regularly updated.

On April 1, the FPS of Public Health has issued new travel recommendations, advising to postpone all non-essential travels to Hong Kong SAR, the province of Guandong in China, Hanoi (Vietnam) and Singapore. On April 4, Shanxi has been added to this list. The list of areas included in the advice is regularly updated, according to the epidemiological evolution of SARS worldwide and to the risk of transmission in the local community.

New letters, with updated information and recommendations on SARS, will be sent in the coming days to hospitals, general practitioners and specialized medical doctors not working in in-patient departments.

Further information is available to the general public and to health professionals on the Ministry of Public Health website (http://www.health.fgov.be/). See further information on SARS below, under “In the rest of the world”. Source: Ministry of Public Health and IPH.
Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) worldwide: update

As of April 8, 2003, 2671 suspect and probable cases of SARS, including 103 deaths, have been reported to the WHO. This number includes 1279 cases from China (mainland), which is currently being investigated by a WHO team.

Canada reports 91 cases and 10 deaths, which represents an increase of 33 cases compared to April 2. All Canadian cases have occurred in persons who have traveled to Asia or had contact with SARS cases in the household or in a health-care setting.

The highest increase of cases is observed in Hong Kong where a total of 928 cases and 25 deaths are reported, which represent an increase of 220 cases and 9 deaths compared to April 2. Most of the deaths occurred in individuals who have a history of chronic diseases, or were patients who sought treatment at a relatively late stage of infection. A major part of these cases are health care workers and residents from the Amoy Garden building where an important transmission of the disease has occurred.

Vietnam, where no new cases were reported during 10 days (from March 24 up to April 2), reported a new probable case on April 3, epidemiologically linked to the French Hospital. In the following days, 3 other cases residing in the Ninh Binh province (100 km from Hanoi) and linked to this new case, were reported to WHO. Media report suggest that more cases may be involved in this province.

Media reports that the first probable SARS case has been reported in Pretoria. A 62-year-old gentleman with a recent history of travel to China was admitted to the Pretoria East hospital on 7 Apr 2003 with symptoms suggestive of SARS. He is currently being investigated.

European countries reporting probable cases are France (4), Germany (5), Italy (3), Ireland (1), Romania (1), Spain (1), Switzerland (1) and United Kingdom (5). No local transmission has been described in Europe.

The WHO recommends postponing non-essential travel to Hong Kong SAR and Guangdong province in China.