



# Public Health Mōno-Gram

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## Outbreak of Novel Coronavirus: First California Cases Reported This Weekend

As widely reported in the media, China is experiencing an outbreak of respiratory illness caused by a previously unknown coronavirus, now called 2019-nCoV. The outbreak is spreading rapidly in China and has spread beyond its borders to at least twelve other countries, including the United States. Over the weekend the first two cases in California and a case in Arizona were confirmed, for a total of five U.S. cases at this time. As of January 27, the Chinese government reported over 4500 cases and over 100 deaths, although some experts believe the actual total is much higher. Hospitals in affected regions of China are overwhelmed by the outbreak.

Over 60 cases have been confirmed outside mainland China, with no deaths to date. In the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is investigating over 100 cases in 26 states. While person-to-person transmission of 2019-nCoV is clearly occurring in China, this has not occurred in the United States.

This is a serious public health concern, and the CDC and California Department of Public Health (CDPH) have activated emergency operations centers providing guidance and situational updates in a dynamic situation. Hospitals are being asked to screen people for risk of this virus and to take precautions to limit spread if a possible case is encountered.

At this point, we do not know whether this will develop into a global epidemic (pandemic) that has the potential to harm many people, stress the capacity of healthcare systems, and widely disrupt travel and commerce. Based upon the information we have so far, the risk is real and a concerted and determined response is appropriate.

This outbreak is reminiscent the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic in the early 2000s. Both epidemics may have started when animal coronaviruses were transmitted to humans in Chinese meat markets. SARS killed 750 people and sickened many more before an aggressive global health response successfully contained it.

Given the risks and the unknowns, it is appropriate to institute control efforts swiftly. Chinese authorities have initiated travel restrictions in China with the “unprecedented quarantine of 50 million people” (*Washington Post*), the deployment of 1000 doctors and military personnel to Wuhan and surrounding areas, and urgent construction of additional healthcare facilities. Internationally, we are on high alert, screening travelers from affected areas, and making health officials aware of what to do should possible cases appear.

Some points worth emphasizing:

- There is no evidence of person-to-person transmission occurring in the United States at this point, so while the situation merits a serious response, the current risk to the public remains low.

- This is an extremely dynamic, fluid, situation which is changing daily. The CDC, CDPH, and local public health agencies throughout the state are fully engaged in this issue and working hard to provide ongoing current and reliable public information, including through their websites (cdc.gov and cdph.ca.gov).
- The lack of detailed information about this virus is frustrating but we can expect to learn more in coming weeks about how it spreads, how best to prevent it, who is at highest risk, and whether there are any effective specific treatments.
- During previous coronavirus outbreaks such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and SARS, human to human transmission occurred through droplets, contact and fomites (contaminated objects), suggesting that the transmission mode of the 2019-nCoV might be similar (WHO). This is similar to influenza and other familiar viruses.
- Healthcare providers must report suspect cases immediately (by telephone) to the County Health Department. This is mandatory under Title 17.
  - The definitions of suspect case can be found here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/clinical-criteria.html> . Case definitions will change as the epidemic evolves.
  - Testing is currently only available at CDC Atlanta. If a possible case is encountered, local public health (Mono County Health Department) will coordinate with healthcare providers, state, and federal public health authorities to facilitate testing, optimal care for affected persons, and to minimize the risk of transmission to others.
- The symptoms of disease caused by the novel coronavirus are indistinguishable from other respiratory illnesses including influenza, such as fever, cough and shortness of breath. Only people who have been in Wuhan City within the past two weeks, or have been in contact with sick people who are confirmed or suspect cases are considered to be at significant risk at this point <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/clinical-criteria.html>
- Healthcare facilities should exercise increased diligence in screening for travel to affected areas, isolating sick people who may be at risk, and practicing infection control. During the SARS epidemic in the U.S., transmission in healthcare settings was the primary driver of U.S. cases. Healthcare facilities are a major focus of current preparedness efforts.
- Recommended healthcare setting infection control practices for dealing with suspect cases include both contact and airborne transmission precautions, utilizing negative airflow rooms when possible. Note that eye protection with face shield or goggles is considered essential. Currently, California healthcare workers who have had contact with suspect or confirmed cases are being furloughed if they did not use full recommended personal protective equipment (PPE). At minimum, patients who might have this virus should wear a standard surgical mask and staff in contact with such patients should use N-95 or PAPR respirators. The number of staff in contact with suspect cases should be minimized.
- Recognize that we do not have enough information about the new virus to make specific recommendations for preventing the spread of disease, so current recommendations are based upon experience with related coronaviruses and standard communicable disease principles and practices.
  - Recommended preventive measures include: avoiding contact with sick people when possible, washing hands, and avoiding touching eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands. Use of simple face masks (surgical masks) by sick persons and by persons in contact with sick persons may decrease transmission, although there is uncertainty.

For more information, consult the CDC or CDPH websites (cdc.gov or cdph.ca.gov) or call the Mono County Health Department (760) 924-1830.