

Beat: Health

New SARS-like virus may pass from person-to-person, WHO says

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USPA News - The new novel coronavirus (nCoV), which emerged in the Middle East last year and has killed at least eighteen people so far, is likely able to pass from person-to-person when there is close contact, a World Health Organization (WHO) official said on Sunday. Dr. Keiji Fukuda, WHO Assistant Director-General for Health Security and the Environment, said the emergence of the new virus is being recognized as an "important and major challenge" for the entire world.

He said experts are now starting to understand some things about the disease, but many details are still unclear. "We know that the disease is caused by a virus from a group called coronaviruses. One member of the coronavirus family is the SARS virus," Fukuda explained at a press conference in the Saudi capital of Riyadh. "This new virus is not the SARS virus. They are distinct from each other. However, the fact that they are related has added to the world's concern." The new coronavirus first emerged in the Middle East and is known to have infected at least 34 people, including 18 people who died of the illness. The disease appeared at a health care facility in Saudi Arabia's eastern province of Ahsaa earlier this month and infected fifteen patients, more than a month after the last case of the virus had been reported. And on Tuesday last week, health authorities in France confirmed the country's first case of the novel coronavirus in a patient who recently traveled to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, where another case had been reported in March. The French Ministry of Social Affairs and Health confirmed Sunday that a second person who shared a hospital room in Valenciennes with the first patient had also been infected. "We know this virus has infected people since 2012, but we don't know where this virus lives," Fukuda said. "We know that when people get infected, many of them develop severe pneumonia. What we don't know is how often people might develop mild disease. We also know that most of the persons who have been infected so far have been older men, often with other medical conditions. We are not sure why we are seeing this pattern and if it will change over time." Fukuda said experts are unsure how people become infected, whether it is from animals, from contaminated surfaces, or from other people. "Finally, we don't know how widespread this virus is, both in this region and in other countries," he said, adding that more research is necessary. But the WHO official said that while there has been no evidence of continuous human-to-human transmission, it appears likely that the virus is able to pass from person-to-person when there is close contact. "The greatest global concern is about the potential for this new virus to spread," he said. Fukuda added: "This is partly because the virus has already caused severe disease in multiple countries, although in small numbers, and has persisted in the region since 2012. Of most concern, however, is the fact that the different clusters seen in multiple countries increasingly support the hypothesis that when there is close contact this novel coronavirus can transmit from person-to-person." The global health body is calling on countries around the world to increase their levels of awareness and surveillance among all people, but especially among staff working in health systems. "When new cases are found, as is likely, it is critical for countries to report these cases and related information urgently to WHO as required by the International Health Regulations because this is the basis for effective international alertness, preparedness and response," Fukuda said. The official praised the Saudi government which has been working closely with international health authorities to stop the virus from spreading further. "One of the reasons why more cases have been identified in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia may be because they have gone ahead to strengthen their surveillance system and lab capacities and network," he said. Fukuda urged other countries to follow Saudi Arabia's example. "Countries need to assess their level of preparedness and readiness if this virus should spread and to intensify strengthening the core capacities identified in the International Health Regulations if they are not adequate," he said. "WHO is ready to assist countries in this region and globally in these tasks."

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