Ask the Expert – Coronavirus

What is Coronavirus?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses. Some cause respiratory illness in people, and others circulate among animals such as camels, cats, and bats. There are seven different coronaviruses that are known to infect humans. Most coronaviruses cause mild illness – an upper respiratory tract infection that looks a lot like the 'common cold.' People can also get a runny nose, headache, cough, sore throat, fever, or just do not feel well. Occasionally certain human coronaviruses can cause pneumonia or bronchitis, a more serious respiratory illness. People with weakened immune systems, infants, and older adults are more at risk of infection and can have a more severe case of illness. SARS is a coronavirus you may have heard of that originated in animals and then moved to infect humans. MERS was another coronavirus that has been in the news. Recently Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) has been showing up in Wahun, China, causing pneumonia and some deaths.

How is it transmitted?

The theory is that 2019 – nCoV is spread by respiratory droplets similar to the way influenza is spread. It is unclear, yet, how this new Coronavirus has spread to people. Typically, Coronaviruses can be spread through the air; by coughing and sneezing, through close personal contact like touching or shaking hands; touching an object that has the virus on it, then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes before washing your hands; and, very rarely, through fecal contamination.

How is this different than influenza or SARS?

New (or novel) viruses appear through mutation. The World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and other agencies watch and test to evaluate whether a new mutation or Coronavirus has been discovered and whether it can affect humans. The CDC currently feels that 2019-nCoV will not cause severe illness in America. However, those who are immunocompromised, the very young, and the very old are always at an increased risk. The CDC will continue to provide updates, and they are working closely with health authorities here in Washington to evaluate this first case.

What can I do to protect myself and my family?

WASH YOUR HANDS!! Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands. Avoid close contact (within 6 feet for a prolonged period) and direct contact (shaking hands, touching, etc.) with others who are sick. If you are sick, stay home and do not go back until you are well. Wash hands frequently with soap and warm water for 20 seconds or more. Cough or sneeze into a tissue, or, if one is not available, cough or sneeze into your sleeve or elbow, NOT into your palm. Take care of yourself. Drink plenty of fluids, rest. Treat fever and headache with over-the-counter medications (remember not to give aspirin to children), and see your healthcare provider if you are concerned about your symptoms.

Information from cdc.gov/coronavirus/about/index.html Accessed 1/21/2020

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