

January 2025

Dear Member

Human Metapneumovirus (HMPV)

A recent outbreak of Human Metapneumovirus (HMPV) in the People's Republic of China has sparked concern, with emerging reports of overcrowded hospitals and panic on social media platforms; however, the World Health Organization (WHO) has confirmed the level of respiratory illness in China is within range for their typical winter season.

Human metapneumovirus (HMPV) is a respiratory virus that usually causes symptoms similar to a cold. You might cough or wheeze, have a runny nose or a sore throat. Most cases are mild, but young children, adults over 65 and people with weakened immune systems are at a higher risk for serious illness.

We would like to stress that the panicked response on social media platforms is unwarranted and that this is not a new mystery virus. It is a familiar virus that we have known about for over forty years that causes respiratory illness in South Africa and all over the world every year, especially during the winter months, along with other viruses such as influenza and respiratory syncytial virus. There is no risk of importing the virus, as this virus already circulates through South Africa.

It is winter in the Northern Hemisphere and China falls in the Northern Hemisphere, like the United States and Europe. Based on the seasonality pattern of the virus, it is not surprising to see a peak in the winter season and an increase in respiratory illness as we do in South Africa. Respiratory infections tend to peak during the winter season.

Professor Cheryl Cohen, head of the Centre for Respiratory Disease and Meningitis at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) has commented that at this stage it does not represent a risk to South Africa at this time of year. The WHO has also assessed the level of respiratory illness in China to be within normal range. It is not unexpected for this virus to occur during the winter season.

Signs and symptoms

Symptoms of HMPV include:

- cough
- fever
- runny or stuffy nose
- sore throat
- wheezing
- shortness of breath (dyspnoea)
- rash.

Diagnosis and tests

Healthcare providers usually diagnose HMPV based on your symptoms and health history. They will use a soft-tipped stick (swab) to get a sample from your nose or throat. A lab tests the sample for a panel of viruses and

other infections. HMPV testing or viral panels are not done unless there are serious or worsening symptoms or non-response to conventional treatment.

Management and treatment

Most cases are mild and last a few days to a week. There are no antiviral medications that treat human metapneumovirus. There are also no vaccines available for the prevention of HMPV. Most people can manage their symptoms with over-the-counter medication or medication prescribed by their general practitioners, which can be taken at home, such as adequate fluid intake, bed rest, paracetamol and antihistamines, until they feel better.

Prevention

You can reduce your risk of getting HMPV and other infectious diseases by:

- washing your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds; if you aren't able to use soap and water, use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser with at least 60% alcohol
- covering your nose and mouth — with your elbow, not your bare hand — when you sneeze or cough
- avoiding other people when you or they are sick with a cold or other contagious diseases; rather stay at home
- considering wearing a mask if you're sick and can't avoid being around others
- avoiding touching your face, eyes, nose and mouth
- not sharing food or eating utensils (forks, spoons and cups) with others.

Conclusion

The National Department of Health (DOH) and the NICD are monitoring the situation in China, as well as continuing the ongoing surveillance in South Africa. As part of the BRICS group of nations, South Africa has good diplomatic and healthcare relations with The People's Republic of China and are kept up to date. The NICD will keep the public informed if there are any new developments. We will continue to monitor hospitalisation trends, as well as pathology results from the various private laboratories for all our client schemes to pick up any trends and will keep you informed of any risks to you.

Yours faithfully

PICK N PAY MEDICAL SCHEME