

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS): Singapore's response

SARS facts

What is SARS?

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) is a respiratory illness that has recently been reported in Asia, North America and Europe. It is a new type of atypical pneumonia that infects the lungs. It is believed to be caused by a new virus of the coronavirus family. First reported in Guangdong (China), Hong Kong and Hanoi (Vietnam), the virus has now spread to other countries, including Singapore

Symptoms

The earliest symptom is a sudden onset of high fever with or without muscle aches. Some patients may also have chills, headaches, shivering spells and cough. After three to seven days, patients may start to cough and experience shortness of breath, and X-ray changes of pneumonia, usually after a further three to four days.

A person is not infectious during the incubation period, which is about three to seven days, but for some, it may be up to 10 days. It appears that SARS becomes infectious only after the infected person develops the symptoms. A small number of SARS infected persons who are very sick can be very infectious.

Transmission

The primary way that SARS appears to spread is by close person-to-person contact. Most cases of SARS have involved people who cared for or lived with someone with SARS, or had direct contact with infectious material (for example, respiratory secretions) from a person who has SARS. Potential ways in which SARS can be spread include touching the skin of other people or objects that are contaminated with infectious droplets and then touching your eye(s), nose, or mouth. This can happen when someone who is sick with SARS coughs or sneezes droplets onto themselves, other people, or nearby surfaces. It also is possible that SARS can be spread more broadly through the air or by other ways that are currently not known.

Chances of Recovery

With proper treatment, there is a very good chance of recovery. Evidence both in Singapore and from the WHO suggests that in about 80% to 90% of cases, a

patient gradually recovers. With good medical care, the mortality rate is only about 4% to 5%.

How did SARS first spread to Singapore?

Most SARS cases in Singapore can be traced to a single person who was infected while staying in Hong Kong. After she returned to Singapore on 1 March 2003, she infected a number of people here who in turn infected others.

Most of the other SARS patients in Singapore have only passed on the virus to a small number of people to whom they have had close contact.

Singapore's response to SARS

The Singapore Government has taken strong measures against the SARS problem, stronger than most other countries in the region, and over and above the recommendations of WHO. We have mobilised the whole Government machinery for this purpose, and have set up a Ministerial Committee to coordinate all the ministries and departments involved, to tackle SARS on three fronts: public health, economy and society.

1. Public health

Detect, isolate and contain

On the public health front, our strategy is to detect, isolate and contain all cases of SARS.

All SARS suspects and patients are isolated and treated at one dedicated hospital. To prevent SARS transmission, no visitors are allowed for SARS patients.

Whenever a SARS case is detected, the Ministry of Health rapidly investigates and traces every person who has come into contact with the patient. All these contacts are then quarantined at home and given instructions to monitor their temperatures daily and to call the Ministry if they feel unwell. The Ministry also checks on them daily. This quarantine measure prevents any potential spread to others in the community. The quarantine is lifted after 10 days if the person remains well and shows no SARS symptoms.

To minimise public exposure to SARS, special arrangements are made for persons with a higher likelihood of being SARS patients to be transported to hospital via private ambulance.

Precautionary measures at public areas

To protect and monitor the healthy, we have cleaned and disinfected public areas where people gather. In all food establishments, food handlers are required to take their temperatures twice a day. Temperature checks are also taking place at workplaces and gatherings. Schools are educating students about SARS, issuing every student with a personal thermometer, and teaching them to check their own temperatures daily.

All hotels in Singapore have the following precautionary measures in place:

- Daily temperature checks for all staff members daily.
- Disinfecting used rooms and common facilities daily.

In addition, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) has awarded hotels which have undertaken a prescribed set of rigorous precautionary measures against SARS a "Cool Singapore" Award.

Likewise, the National Environment Agency of Singapore has launched the "Singapore's OK" initiative, a voluntary scheme that encourages the people, private and public sectors to achieve a high standard of environmental hygiene and good public health. The display of a "Singapore's OK" label marks the commitment of the establishment concerned.

Prevention against import and export of SARS

Our borders remain open and we welcome visitors, tourists, businessmen and students. We have taken measures to ensure SARS is not imported or exported.

All travellers arriving in Singapore are issued with health advisories on SARS and are asked to fill in health declaration cards. Health checks have been stepped up to identify people with fever. We have built thermal scanners that enable us to scan the temperatures of large numbers of people efficiently and without intrusion. Travellers who are detected as having fevers are offered free SARS screening at the dedicated hospital - Tan Tock Seng Hospital. Travellers departing from Singapore are similarly checked for fevers. These measures make Singapore a safe transit point, as well as a safe place to visit.

Should any traveller be diagnosed as a SARS case after being screened at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, contact tracing will be activated to establish his/her contacts quickly. Contacts with local residences will be issued Home Quarantine Orders, regardless of whether they are Singaporeans. For foreign contacts who are leaving Singapore within 48 hours, the relevant foreign authorities will be notified through the World Health Organisation, so that contact tracing there can be activated if necessary. (This is based on the understanding that incubation period for SARS is between two to 10 days.)

Because of our extensive screening thus far, we have been able to limit the transborder spread of SARS. For example, a passenger on board a flight from Hong Kong to Melbourne on 27 April, on transit in Singapore, was detected to be having a fever by a thermal scanner. He was transferred to Tan Tock Seng Hospital for observation, and was diagnosed as a suspect SARS case on 28 Apr. If Singapore had not screened that flight, he would have gone on to Melbourne. So although the traveller may not originate from Singapore, by our actions, we are reducing the risk of transborder transmission to other countries.

Precautions have also been taken to enable people to continue to enter Singapore for work and study. New employment pass, work permit and student pass holders from SARS-affected countries continue to be welcomed, but will be placed on a 10-day quarantine on arrival. This is to minimise the possibility of transmission in the workplace, the living quarters of foreign employees or educational establishments.

Investigation into foreign cases

We investigate every foreign case of suspected or probable SARS, whereby the person has a travel history to Singapore. Contact tracing is carried out to identify all possible sources of infection and to prevent further spread of infection. We work with relevant authorities in other countries or the World Health Organization to determine crucial information such as the dates of stay in Singapore and the date of the onset of SARS. Findings are reported to WHO and shared with the countries and all concerned, including the media, in an open and transparent manner.

Thus far, there are no definitive indications that any foreign nationals have contracted SARS while in Singapore, notwithstanding such claims in the foreign media.

ASEAN cooperation

The war against SARS will not be over until other SARS-hit countries are also free of the bug. To that end, ASEAN leaders have recently hammered out a common strategy to combat SARS, putting in place a series of coordinated measures to keep their borders open while ensuring that the virus will be contained. ASEAN leaders have pledged to set up a network to share information on SARS and have standardised health declaration cards and temperature checks for air passengers

2. Economy

Business continuity

On the economic front, we have encouraged companies to work out business continuity plans, so that they can continue to operate even if their staff fall ill. Special attention has been placed on essential services, such as utilities, to ensure uninterrupted services.

Help for affected businesses

The Government recognises the economic hardship brought about by SARS. To help alleviate the immediate problems, we announced on 17 April a relief package worth \$230 million to help the tourism and travel-related sectors, which are the worst hit.

Concerted steps have also been taken to revitalise businesses. The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) has launched “Step Out! Singapore” to stimulate tourism and encourage Singaporeans to participate in public life.

Help for the quarantined

We are also helping people placed under Home Quarantine Orders (HQOs). Under the Home Quarantine Order Allowance Scheme, the Government will pay an allowance to self-employed persons who are served HQOs, to make up part of his income. It will also give the allowance to establishments whose employees have been affected by HQOs. This will defray part of their manpower costs for the duration of the HQO. It will be especially helpful to smaller businesses, which may otherwise be unable to survive. However, newly arrived work-pass holders who are required to undergo a 10-day quarantine will not be eligible for the HQO Allowance.

Through the HQO Allowance Scheme, the Government will be bearing a good part of the wage cost of the businesses affected.

3. Society

The Government has taken pains to maintain open and honest communication with all sectors of the population, including expatriates.

Details on SARS and all new infections have been made public daily through press conferences chaired by the Minister for Health and also regular press releases.

All key stakeholder groups are informed and educated on their social responsibility in containing the spread of SARS. Health advisories on SARS have been issued to hospitals, primary healthcare providers, airports, seaports, schools, work places, tour operators and housing providers, explaining the symptoms of SARS and giving advice on simple precautions and hygiene practices that should be followed.

Extensive public education efforts have been made to reach all sectors of society, using posters, ads, commercials, information booklets to households and hotel rooms, dialogue sessions, briefings, visits, etc. We have also provided full information on Singapore's response to SARS on one website – www.sars.gov.sg.

What is the current situation in Singapore?

Through the robust measures taken by the Government, the impact of SARS on the lives of Singaporeans has been limited. A degree of comfort and confidence has returned, and people are going out again to shops, cinemas and swimming pools.

Singapore's efforts have been recognised

Singapore has earned high marks for anti-SARS efforts such as the designation of Tan Tock Seng as the SARS hospital, the decision to quarantine at home those in close contact with SARS cases and the no-visitor rule at public hospitals.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States (CDC) has removed its travel advisory on Singapore as it considers SARS contained in Singapore. Singapore is now on CDC's "travel alert" list, which means that the CDC no longer advises against travel to Singapore but only advises travellers of the precautions they should take.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has praised Singapore for its measures to contain the SARS outbreak. WHO communicable diseases chief David Heymann said: "We're very pleased with the efforts that are being made, and I believe that we are confident that the epidemic has peaked and that it's on its way down." (The Straits Times, 1 May 03)

In a joint press statement issued (6 May) between the US and Singapore after a meeting between US President George W Bush and Singapore's Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, it was noted that "President Bush commended Singapore for its quick, decisive, and transparent response to SARS and expressed confidence that Singapore's efforts to prevent the spread of the disease would succeed."

Business groups representing foreign interests, including the American, British, European, Canadian and Japanese chambers of commerce in Singapore, have also backed Singapore's approach to SARS.

Singapore will remain vigilant

Singapore will continue to be vigilant and allocate all the resources needed to remain on top of the situation by continuing to do things better. While SARS has

inflicted some social and economic damage, we are making clear inroads to recovery because prompt and decisive actions are being taken, not just within Singapore, but in cooperation with our neighbours.

For more information...

Further information on the SARS situation in Singapore is available from the following sources:

- www.sars.gov.sg (Singapore government website on SARS)
- www.moh.gov.sg (Ministry of Health)
- www.epic.gov.sg (Emergency Public Information Centre)
- www.singaporecanlah.com