

SEVERE ACUTE RESPIRATORY SYNDROME (SARS)

Increasingly concerning and confused information is being published in the popular media following the development of this condition, which is considered to be a new infection not previously seen and which has resulted in a significant number of fatalities worldwide.

SARS, we understand at the present time, is caused by a viral infection and is characterised by a sudden high fever and a variety of chest symptoms which can include cough, sore throat, shortness of breath and difficulty in breathing.

The symptoms usually occur approximately 10 days after being exposed to the virus. At the present time, the experts are not sure whether individuals who will develop symptoms are actually infectious before the symptoms develop during the initial 10 day incubation period. We would suggest that it would be prudent at the present time to assume that they are. Initially it was thought that people developed the symptoms after they had breathed in the virus from an air conditioning system or when somebody sneezed in close quarters. Because, in fact, SARS is not considered to be highly infectious and is relatively low down the infectivity scale it is now considered that the route of transmission of the virus may well be person-to-person contact. This is usually defined as someone who has cared or nursed an individual with SARS or has direct contact with respiratory secretions or other body fluids of a person with SARS. In the workplace setting, this is rarely the case and therefore the risk of infection is considered to be low.

At the present time, the World Health Organisation has identified 2 areas in China as the source of the original infection:

- Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
- Guangdong Province

In addition, SARS has also been reported in Vietnam, Singapore, Toronto, Beijing and Taiwan. Cases continue to occur and if you have staff who are thinking of travelling to these areas, careful consideration should be given at the present time to postponing the travel plans or using other means of communication.

If you are aware of individuals who have recently travelled to the infected areas and have returned to the United Kingdom, it is important that they are aware of the symptoms of SARS. Although current Government medical advice is that these individuals should continue with their normal daily routine, which includes attending work, due to the uncertain nature of our information with regards to this condition, from an Occupational Health perspective we would recommend that such individuals do not return to work until they have been back in the United Kingdom for 14 days and are considered to be symptom-free. However, if they develop any of

the symptoms as stated above, they should seek medical attention immediately and inform the healthcare staff of their recent travel history.

To date there have been no cases reported in the United Kingdom where people have developed SARS who have not travelled in the Far East. At the present time there are no cases reported in the United Kingdom from people who have only been in contact with individuals who have subsequently developed symptoms of SARS.

