

France confirms first case of new SARS-related virus (Update)

May 8 2013, by Angela Charlton

A 65-year-old Frenchman is hospitalized after contracting France's first case of a deadly new respiratory virus related to SARS, and French health authorities said Wednesday they are trying to find anyone who might have been in contact with him to prevent it from spreading.

It's unclear how or where the man was infected with the novel coronavirus, which has killed 18 people and raised new public health concerns since being identified last year in the Middle East. It can cause acute pneumonia and kidney failure.

The patient fell ill after returning from a nine-day vacation in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates as part of a package tour, the Health Ministry said. Jean-Yves Grall, the French government health director, said the patient is in "worrying condition" under isolation and medical surveillance, receiving respiratory assistance and blood transfusions.

The man, whose identity was not released, returned from Dubai on April 17. He was hospitalized with respiratory problems in the northern French city of Valenciennes on April 23, and transferred to a more advanced facility in Douai on April 29, Grall told a news conference Wednesday.

Paris' Pasteur Institute analyzed the man's virus and confirmed Tuesday that it is a novel coronavirus.

Since September 2012, the World Health Organization has been informed of 30 confirmed cases of the virus, and 18 of the patients have

died. Cases have emerged in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE, Qatar, Britain and Germany, and health officials say the virus has likely already spread from person to person in some circumstances.

Since the virus emerged last year, European authorities have put in place monitoring measures. In France, 20 people were examined for suspected cases of the virus, and the other 19 turned up negative, Health Minister Marisol Touraine said.

The patient who traveled to Dubai is the only positive case. His family members have been tested and are not infected, the Health Ministry said, and the other travelers in his tour group and health care workers who had contact with him are also being tested.

Authorities are trying to reach anyone else who was in contact with the patient before he was hospitalized, and a national hotline was established Wednesday for the public to call about the virus.

WHO has advised countries to test any people with unexplained pneumonia.

"Any virus that has the potential to develop into something that is highly transmissible between people, including the coronavirus, is a major concern," WHO spokesman Gregory Hartl said.

"We need to follow up on all possible routes of infection, i.e. animal to human, whether it's being spread in hospitals or from human-to-human," he said.

Health authorities are trying to determine how humans are contracting and spreading the virus and how best to treat it. It does not appear to be as contagious as SARS or the flu, but it seems to have spread among family members in Britain and in health workers in Jordan who were

caring for patients, for example.

The new coronavirus is most closely related to a bat virus and scientists are considering whether bats or other animals like goats or camels are a possible source of infection.

Hartl said it's unclear whether there is something specific in the environment in the Middle Eastern countries where cases have been confirmed.

SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome, killed some 800 people in a 2003 epidemic.

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Citation: France confirms first case of new SARS-related virus (Update) (2013, May 8) retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-05-france-1st-case-sars-related-virus.html>

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