

Diseases, Disorders and Injuries

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)

On this page

[What is Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome \(SARS\)?](#)

[How common is it?](#)

[What are the symptoms of SARS?](#)

[What is the cause of SARS?](#)

[How long does SARS take to develop?](#)

[How is SARS transmitted?](#)

[Which occupations are at risk?](#)

[What are the recommendations to prevent transmission of SARS?](#)

What is Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)?

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome or SARS is a viral respiratory infection similar to pneumonia caused by the SARS-CoV-1 virus. A similar [coronavirus](#) SARS-CoV-2 is known for causing COVID-19. This fact sheet is about SARS, not COVID-19.

How common is it?

During the initial outbreak of SARS, between November 2002 and July 2003, there were 251 suspected infections in Canada, with most cases occurring in Toronto. The first Canadian cases were identified in March 2003 in people who had travelled to Hong Kong and returned to Canada.

SARS demonstrated how quickly a virus can spread internationally.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that since 2004 there have been no known cases of SARS anywhere in the world.

What are the symptoms of SARS?

The illness begins with a fever greater than 38°C (100.4°F) and can include other symptoms such as chills, headache, muscular aches, malaise, dry cough and shortness of breath, or breathing difficulties.

What is the cause of SARS?

SARS is caused by a virus called SARS-associated coronavirus. Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that also include the [common cold](#). Research revealed that the SARS virus was transmitted from civet cats to humans.

How long does SARS take to develop?

The incubation period for SARS ranges in general from 2 to 10 days.

How is SARS transmitted?

SARS spreads from person to person through close contact. Examples of close contact include caring for or living with a person known to have SARS, or having direct contact with droplets from coughing or sneezing of someone infected with SARS.

Which occupations are at risk?

People caring for individuals with SARS are at the greatest risk of contracting the disease. During known outbreaks, people at risk included all health care workers in institutional settings, such as acute care hospitals, rehabilitation hospitals, mental health hospitals, long-term care facilities, and emergency departments, and others who worked close to their clients or patients.

Persons living with individuals with SARS are also at risk for contracting the disease.

What are the recommendations to prevent transmission of SARS?

If a new outbreak or similar epidemic occurs, the guidelines found in the OSH Answers [Coronavirus](#) fact sheet should help prevent transmission. In addition, check with organizations such as Health Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (USA), and the World Health Organization (WHO), which will be monitoring any new situation and will include infection control guidance for workers at risk.

Fact sheet last revised: 2025-09-05

Disclaimer

Although every effort is made to ensure the accuracy, currency and completeness of the information, CCOHS does not guarantee, warrant, represent or undertake that the information provided is correct, accurate or current. CCOHS is not liable for any loss, claim, or demand arising directly or indirectly from any use or reliance upon the information.