



## Background

On 31 December 2019, the Government of China reported a cluster of cases of pneumonia of unknown cause in Wuhan, Hubei Province. A novel coronavirus was identified in January 2020 (2019-nCoV, now called COVID-19). Since then, cases have been reported across China and in several other countries.

**NOTE:** The situation is evolving rapidly. For the latest information, please check the [WHO HQ](#) and [WHO WPRO](#) Twitter accounts.

## Snapshot

- WHO has increased our assessment of the risk of spread and the risk of impact of COVID-19 to 'very high' at the regional and global level.
- WPRO has released guidance for countries and areas in the Western Pacific Region to prepare for large-scale community transmission of COVID-19.
- The WHO-China Joint Mission on COVID-19 led by Dr Bruce Aylward concluded its visit. The results and recommendations of the mission have been published as received from the mission, unabridged by WHO.
- WHO has released updated recommendations for international traffic in relation to COVID-19.
- WHO will endeavour to keep our partners updated on the latest information.

## Key issues

### *1. Current situation/risk assessment*

The recent increases in the number of affected countries and cases are of concern.

We are monitoring these developments continuously, and on 28 February WHO increased our assessment of the risk of spread and the risk of impact of COVID-19 to 'very high' at the regional and global level.

What we see at the moment are linked epidemics of COVID-19 in several countries, but most cases can still be traced to known contacts or clusters of cases. We do not see evidence as yet of large-scale community transmission.

As long as that's the case, we still have a chance of containing this virus, if robust action is taken to detect cases early, isolate and care for patients and trace contacts.

But countries should act now to prepare for large-scale community transmission.

## *2. Preparing for large-scale community transmission*

On 28 February, WHO released [guidance for countries and areas in the Western Pacific Region to prepare for large-scale community transmission of COVID-19](#).

It calls on countries and areas to get ready to rapidly adapt when local epidemiological data indicate that large-scale community transmission is occurring, in line with the Asia Pacific Strategy for Emerging Diseases and public health emergencies (APSED III).

In this scenario, intensive efforts to identify and trace individual cases would no longer be the main priority. Resources would instead be focused on monitoring the spread and characteristics of the virus, identifying and managing severe cases, preventing onward transmission, alleviating strains on health services, informing the public, and reducing overall social and economic impact.

The document aims to help steer actions by national authorities responsible for managing the COVID-19 response across nine priority areas: incident management, planning and multisectoral coordination; surveillance and risk assessment; laboratory; clinical management and health care services; infection prevention and control; non-pharmaceutical public health measures; risk communication; points of entry; and operational logistics.

## *3. WHO-led joint mission to China*

The WHO-China Joint Mission on COVID-19 led by Dr Bruce Aylward concluded its visit on 24 February. The results and recommendations of the mission have been published as received from the mission, unabridged by WHO.

The joint team included 25 international and Chinese experts in epidemiology, virology, clinical management and public health who conducted field research in Beijing, Guangdong Province, Sichuan Province and Wuhan City of Hubei Province.

The team assessed the epidemic situation, prevention and control measures, health services and scientific research.

The report presents findings regarding the virus, the epidemic situation, the means of transmission, the severity of the disease and the strategies and measures taken.

It presents recommendations for China, for countries with imported cases and/or outbreaks of COVID-19, for countries without infections, for the public, and for the international community.

For more information:

- [Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on COVID-19](#)
- [Transcript of WHO-China joint mission press conference in Wuhan \(24 Feb\)](#)
- [Press briefing in Geneva with Dr Bruce Aylward, team lead](#)

#### 4. *Updated travel guidance*

On 29 February WHO released updated advice for international traffic in relation to COVID-19, considering the rapidly evolving situation. It supersedes the advice published on 27 January.

WHO continues to advise against the application of travel or trade restrictions to countries experiencing outbreaks, as they may: divert resources from other interventions; interrupt needed aid and technical support; disrupt businesses; and have negative social and economic effects on the affected countries. However, evidence shows such measures may be justified at the beginning of an outbreak, while still in the containment phase, as they may delay importation of cases, allowing countries to better prepare, even if only for a few days. Such measures should be based on a risk assessment, be proportionate to the level of risk, be short in duration and be reconsidered frequently as we gain more knowledge about the virus.

Sick travellers should delay or avoid travel to affected areas. Travellers returning from affected areas should self-monitor for symptoms for 14 days and follow national protocols

of receiving countries; and if symptoms occur they should contact a health care provider and inform them about their travel history and symptoms.

#### *5. WHO's response*

The three levels of WHO (country office, regional office and headquarters) continue to work intensively to respond to this outbreak. We encourage all countries to continue preparedness activities, including preparing for the possibility of large-scale community transmission of the virus.

WHO has issued a global [Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan](#), [Guidance for countries and areas in the Western Pacific Region to prepare for large-scale community transmission of COVID-19](#) and [interim guidance](#) on various technical aspects. We will continue to update in consultation with experts across the globe.

In the Western Pacific Region specifically, WHO has very strong expertise in communicable disease surveillance and control, including working with countries to control other new disease outbreaks such as H7N9, H5N1 and SARS. WHO will continue to work formally and informally with WPR countries and provide any support needed to gain a better understanding of this new virus, identify any cases and help to prevent infection and onward transmission, as well as support countries to prepare for the possibility of community transmission.

One specific example of the support we are providing is the procurement of diagnostic kits and personal protective equipment for responders in countries.

#### *6. Rumours and misinformation*

During times of uncertainty, rumour and misinformation can spread quickly and be harmful to response measures and local communities. Unfortunately, we are seeing this in the current outbreak – with many harmful rumours circulating online.

WHO encourages people – including journalists – to please make sure any information they pass on has been confirmed by WHO or relevant government authorities. Following the

declaration of the outbreak as a PHEIC, WHO urges all countries to strengthen risk communication and to provide clear, timely, evidence-based information to the public.

WHO is actively working with social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and Google, and Weibo and WeChat in China, to fight the “infodemic” of rumours and misinformation.

Please refer to our [myth busters page](#) for relevant materials and information.

### *7. Disease severity*

Current information suggests that the virus initially presents with mild symptoms, such as fever and dry cough. It can progress to more severe illness – and people with existing conditions appear to have increased vulnerability to this. Older people appear more likely to have greater susceptibility to severe illness, but we are in the relatively new stages of understanding this disease and there is still a lot we don’t know. Pre-existing conditions reported so far include hypertension and other cardiovascular problems, diabetes, liver problems and other respiratory diseases.

Around 80% of cases seem to have mild disease, around 14% appear to progress to severe disease, and some 5% are critical. Authorities report that 2-4% of people with the disease have died.

Of the reported deaths to date, the current information indicates that the death rate is significantly higher among older people with underlying health conditions that may have weakened their immune systems.

There is still a lot that is unknown about this virus and WHO is monitoring the situation closely and using this information to inform our advice to countries about how to prepare and respond.

### *8. Advice to the public*

WHO recommends all members of the public take care of their health and protect others by doing the following:

- Regularly and thoroughly clean hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water
- Maintain at least 1 metre distance with anyone who is coughing
- Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth
- When coughing, cover mouth and nose with a bent elbow or tissue, dispose of the used tissue immediately and clean hands
- Stay home if unwell. Anyone with a fever, cough and difficulty breathing should seek medical attention in line with instructions from local health authorities
- Stay informed on the latest developments about COVID-19.

People who shop in wet markets can take the following precautions:

- Wash hands with soap and water after touching animals and animal products
- Avoid touching eyes, nose or mouth
- Avoid contact with sick animals and spoiled meat
- Avoid contact with stray animals, waste and fluids in market.

Please see our [advice to the public](#) for more information and relevant materials.

### **For more information and the latest updates**

Follow [@WHOWPRO](#) (updated case numbers for the Region posted daily) and [@WHO](#) on Twitter, and/or go to the [WPRO website](#).