

# NEWS

## Patient with new strain of coronavirus is treated in intensive care at London hospital

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A new strain of coronavirus that causes acute serious respiratory illness has been confirmed in a patient in Britain.

The man, a 49 year old from Qatar who had recently travelled to Saudi Arabia, is currently receiving intensive care in a London hospital. The virus is genetically the same as one recently isolated by Dutch researchers in a patient from Saudi Arabia who later died. These are the only two confirmed cases of the strain anywhere in the world.

There is a variety of coronaviruses, which include the viruses that cause the common cold and severe acute respiratory syndrome. SARS, first identified in China in 2003, killed around 750 people globally before being brought under control.

The UK Health Protection Agency has said that because this is a new virus it is better to err on the side of caution to prevent its spread. The patient is being managed in strict respiratory isolation, and any staff members caring for him must wear full personal protective equipment, including a respirator, goggles, gown, and gloves.

The agency said that it was aware of a small number of other cases of serious respiratory illness in people from the Middle East in the past three months, one of whom was treated in the United Kingdom but has since died. This person's illness is also being investigated, although there is no evidence at present to indicate that it was caused by the same virus or linked to the other two cases.

At the moment it is not clear whether these two confirmed cases are typical of infection with this virus or whether it could be circulating more widely but causing a milder illness.

Coronaviruses are spread like other respiratory infections, such as when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The viruses are fairly fragile and survive outside the body for only around 24

hours. They are easily destroyed by the usual detergents and cleaning agents.

There is currently no evidence of illness among contacts of the two patients, including healthcare workers. The incubation period is currently considered to be up to seven days, and many of these contacts will already have passed the period when they could have contracted the virus. Suspicious symptoms would include fever, cough, shortness of breath, and breathing difficulties.

John Watson, head of the respiratory diseases department at the Health Protection Agency, said, "In the light of the severity of the illness that has been identified in the two confirmed cases, immediate steps have been taken to ensure that people who have been in contact with the UK case have not been infected, and there is no evidence to suggest that they have."

He added: "As we are aware of only two cases worldwide, and there is no specific evidence of ongoing transmission, at present there is no specific advice for the public or returning travellers to take, but we will share any further advice with the public as soon as more information becomes available."

The agency recommends that any people recently returning from Saudi Arabia or Qatar with a serious respiratory illness should be managed in strict respiratory isolation and that all staff treating them should wear personal protective equipment. Any UK doctors who think that they may have such a patient should call the fever service on 0844 7788990.

The World Health Organization said that it is investigating further to determine the public health implications of these two cases but is not recommending any travel restrictions at the moment.

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