**Overview**

On 31 December 2019, the *World Health Organisation* WHO was alerted to several cases of pneumonia in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China. The virus did not match any other known virus. This raised concern because when a virus is new, we do not know how it affects people.

One week later, on 7 January, Chinese authorities confirmed that they had identified a new virus. The new virus is a [coronavirus](https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus), which is a family of viruses that include the common cold, and viruses such as [SARS](https://www.who.int/csr/sars/en/) and [MERS](https://www.who.int/emergencies/mers-cov/en/). This new virus was temporarily named “2019-nCoV” and is now widely known as COVID-19. [[1]](#footnote-1)

WHO has been working with Chinese authorities and global experts from the day we were informed, to learn more about the virus, how it affects the people who are sick with it, how they can be treated, and what countries can do to respond.

Because this is a coronavirus, which usually causes respiratory illness, WHO has advice to people on [how to protect themselves and those around them](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public) from getting the disease.[[2]](#footnote-2)

WHO’s standard recommendations for the general public to reduce exposure to and transmission of a range of illnesses are as follows, which include hand and respiratory hygiene, and safe food practices:

* *Frequently clean hands by using alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water;*
* *When coughing and sneezing cover mouth and nose with flexed elbow or tissue – throw tissue away immediately and wash hands;*
* *Avoid close contact with anyone who has fever and cough;*
* *If you have fever, cough and difficulty breathing seek medical care early and share previous travel history with your health care provider;*
* *When visiting live markets in areas currently experiencing cases of novel coronavirus, avoid direct unprotected contact with live animals and surfaces in contact with animals;*
* *The consumption of raw or undercooked animal products should be avoided. Raw meat, milk or animal organs should be handled with care, to avoid cross-contamination with uncooked foods, as per good food safety practices.*

**What is novel coronavirus?**

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that can cause a range of illnesses, from the common cold to more severe infections like [MERS-CoV](https://www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk/advice/disease-prevention-advice/middle-east-respiratory-syndrome). SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) was a coronavirus.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Some coronaviruses infect animals. Occasionally these viruses are transmitted from animals to humans.

In January 2020 China discovered a new coronavirus when it was investigating cases of pneumonia (from December 2019) in people in Wuhan city, Hubei province, China. This new virus is called 2019-nCoV, and is now known widely as COVID-19.

**How are people infected?**

It is not yet known how people are being infected by the virus.

The first cases all worked at a large seafood market that also sold live animals. It is thought that the virus may have been caught from an animal, although this is not confirmed. It is not known what this animal could be.

Some of the infections seem to have been caught from people who were already ill with the virus.

**The illness in people**

Symptoms of a coronavirus infection usually start up to 14 days after catching the infection.

Most people with the virus have had a fever, a cough and problems breathing. A few people have been severely ill.

**Treatment**

All of the cases have been looked after in hospital.

There is no specific treatment yet for the virus. Antibiotics will not work because it is a virus.

There is no vaccine against the virus.

**Prevention**

**If you are travelling to an area of risk, you should take these measures:**

***Prior to Departure***

* **Check travel advisories (restrictions)**- travel advisories will be highlighted on the specific [destination pages](https://www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk/destinations) of fit for travel under outbreak information and on the [foreign and commonwealth office](https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice) website.[[4]](#footnote-4)
* **Be prepared** - Before you travel seek advice from your healthcare practitioner to ensure that any necessary vaccinations and antimalarial tablets (if required) can be arranged. Do this well in advance if possible (at least 4 weeks) as courses of vaccines may take time. There is no vaccine available at present to protect against a novel coronavirus. This is also a good opportunity to discuss other travel health issues.
* **Always ensure you have health insurance cover**- Travel insurance is essential and must cover medical evacuation and repatriation in the event that you become unwell and have to be transported home.
* **Consider taking a first aid kit** - this should include a small, basic first aid kit, including some means of checking body temperature, either a thermometer or strips to place on the forehead and alcohol-based rub for hand hygiene.

***During Travel***

* **Hand washing.** Frequent and careful hand washing is one of the most important ways of preventing the spread of infection. If soap, clean water and towels are not available, alcohol hand rub can be used. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth unless your hands are clean.
* Avoid close contact with people who appear unwell and their personal items.
* **Avoid contact with animals, poultry** (chickens, ducks, geese, pigeons, quail) or wild birds, and the places where they are present, for example, bird/animal markets, commercial or backyard farms. Also avoid contact with sick or dead animals or birds.
* **Do not eat uncooked or undercooked poultry or meat.** All meat and poultry, including eggs must be thoroughly cooked.
* **If you become unwell with a fever,** **cough or difficulty with breathing, promptly seek out medical attention.** Your embassy can assist with contacting medical aid and relatives. Postpone any further travel until you are well again.
* **Do not attempt to bring live animals, poultry or poultry products back into the country.**

**On Returning to the UK – General advice**

* **Pay attention to your health on return,** particularly over the first 14 days.
* **If you develop symptoms** such as those mentioned above or any other 'Flu like' or respiratory illness during this period, seek immediate medical attention. Contact one of the following:
  + **Your General Practitioner (GP)**
  + **NHS 111 (England):** Call 111 from your phone
* **Before you** **visit a health-care setting** (for example your health centre or a hospital), phone ahead, describe your symptoms and provide details of your recent travel history.
* **Follow the advice you are given.**
* **Do not travel while** **you are unwell and limit your contact with others** as much as possible to prevent the spread of any infectious illness until you can be seen by a Doctor.
* **Follow good hygiene practices:** cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, use tissues only once, disposing of them promptly and carefully, wash hands frequently.

### Update from Public Health England [[5]](#footnote-5)

**Category 1:** Travellers should self-isolate, even if asymptomatic, and use the [111 online coronavirus service](https://111.nhs.uk/covid-19) to find out what to do next. Go home or to your destination and then self-isolate.

**Category 2:** Travellers do not need to undertake any special measures, but if they develop symptoms they should self-isolate and call NHS 111.

The guidance for Italy, Iran, Daegu or Cheongdo (Republic of Korea), Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam applies to individuals who returned from these specific areas on or after 19 February 2020.

| **Category 1 countries/areas** | **Category 2 countries/areas** |
| --- | --- |
| Wuhan city and Hubei Province (China, [see map](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-specified-countries-and-areas/covid-19-specified-countries-and-areas-with-implications-for-returning-travellers-or-visitors-arriving-in-the-uk#china)) | Cambodia |
| Iran | China\* |
| Daegu or Cheongdo (Republic of Korea, [see map](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-specified-countries-and-areas/covid-19-specified-countries-and-areas-with-implications-for-returning-travellers-or-visitors-arriving-in-the-uk#korea)) | Hong Kong |
| Any Italian town under containment measures ([see map](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-specified-countries-and-areas/covid-19-specified-countries-and-areas-with-implications-for-returning-travellers-or-visitors-arriving-in-the-uk#italy)) | Italy: north\* ([see map](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-specified-countries-and-areas/covid-19-specified-countries-and-areas-with-implications-for-returning-travellers-or-visitors-arriving-in-the-uk#italy)) |
|  | Japan |
|  | Laos |
|  | Macau |
|  | Malaysia |
|  | Myanmar |
|  | Republic of Korea\* |
|  | Singapore |
|  | Taiwan |
|  | Thailand |
|  | Vietnam |

### School

Any students due to arrive from **Category 1** high-risk areas/countries to the UK are alerted that if they should postpone their trip to the UK or, dependent on circumstances, advised of the need to self-isolate for two weeks, even if they have no symptoms.

All other students, including those due to arrive from **Category 2** high-risk areas/countries, are alerted that if they get flu-like symptoms (such as fever, weakness, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, vomiting, diarrhoea etc.) within two weeks after arrival or if they suspect that they have been exposed to the virus, should take the following advice, taken from the Home Office website.[[6]](#footnote-6)

* **Use the** [**111 online coronavirus service**](https://111.nhs.uk/service/covid-19) **to find out what to do next.**
* **Do not go to a GP surgery, pharmacy or hospital.**

***Please follow this advice even if your symptoms are minor.***

**Current Risk**

**For *International House Belfast’s* staff and student population, the risk from COVID-19 is considered “low”.**

The school is not sending any staff to the Category 1 affected areas for the foreseeable future.

The school does not actively recruit students from Wuhan or Hubei Province in China or Iran. There are currently no students from any of the Category 1 regions. Additionally, the school does not have a very large student population[[7]](#footnote-7) from the current list of Category 2 affected areas/countries, and many of those studying with us have already been resident in the UK for some time before enrolling.

The school only works with reputable study abroad companies, who take a responsible attitude toward student welfare.

Pending arrivals are checked on a weekly basis for effective monitoring – students from Category 1 areas are advised to postpone their start date. If they are already resident in the UK the school determines whether they have already been in the UK long enough to negate the necessity for the fortnight’s self-isolation.

All students accepted for study have *‘Message for Travellers’* information, outlining sensible precautionary measures, linked from their official acceptance documents.

Posters with reminders about common-sense precautions to take in order to remain virus-free are displayed around the school, and there is easy access to hand sanitisers on every floor.

This policy information is published on the school’s website and is available to all staff, including homestay providers and first-aiders, and will be subject to frequent reviews until official guidelines suggest that it is no longer necessary to do so.

1. <https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus> accessed 06/03/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public> accessed 06/03/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/factsheet-health-professionals-coronaviruses> accessed 06/03/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice> accessed 06/03/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-specified-countries-and-areas/covid-19-specified-countries-and-areas-with-implications-for-returning-travellers-or-visitors-arriving-in-the-uk> (accessed 06/03/2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public> accessed 06/03/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. March 2020 figures - 2% from China, 4% Korean, 1% Taiwan, 2% Japan, 4% Thailand, 4% Italian as of 06/03/2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)