

SEVERE ACUTE RESPIRATORY SYNDROM (SARS)

What Are We Doing About It?

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Published by Streetline, Inc., 2003

Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), a highly contagious and sometimes fatal respiratory illness that has been reported in more than 25 countries, is quickly becoming a real concern. While SARS exposure has still been primarily limited to Southeast Asian countries, the rapid spread of the syndrome has caused concern worldwide.

While there isn't yet an insurance industry response to SARS, it is realistic to assume that if the syndrome continues to spread, insurance agents will need to get up to speed on SARS, its treatments and new developments in prevention.

How Is SARS Spread?

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) <www.cdc.gov>, SARS appears to spread by close person-to-person contact or from direct contact with infectious material from a person who has SARS. Scientists at the CDC and other laboratories have detected infection by a coronavirus in patients with SARS. Sequencing of the virus genome by the CDC has confirmed that this infectious agent is a previously unrecognized strain of the virus.

Where Has SARS Been Reported?

While SARS has been reported in the United States, most cases have been traced to people who recently have traveled to China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Vietnam. Because SARS is highly contagious, health officials are watching the disease closely and are hoping that the more information available to the public, the better the chances are of containing this potentially fatal disease. One reliable resource is MayoClinic.com <www.mayoclinic.com>. Since its identification in February of this year, SARS has affected more than 5,300 patients worldwide and resulted in more than 355 deaths.

How is SARS Treated?

Although most people with SARS have recovered, it is still unknown why some people die from the disease, and there is no 100% effective treatment for people infected with the syndrome. i-STAT Corporation <www.i-stat.com>, a leading manufacturer of point-of-care diagnostic systems for blood analysis, has responded to an emergency order for 395 i-STAT Portable Clinical Analyzers, the system used to monitor critical pulmonary function changes (i.e., acute respiratory failure) in ICU patients, by stepping-up shipments of their product to health-care facilities in China. It is hoped that the i-STAT system can help doctors better monitor patients affected by SARS.

Is There a Test for SARS?

Until now, there hasn't been an effective diagnostic test for SARS. However, Focus Technologies <www.focustechnologies.com>, the Cypress, California-based developer and provider of infectious disease testing services and diagnostic products, recently developed a first-generation, real-time PCR test designed to detect the presence of the coronavirus associated with the development of SARS in patients. Focus Technologies also offers viral culture test methods capable of growing the SARS coronavirus as well as other viral respiratory pathogens.

How Can We Prevent the Spread of SARS?

Until a vaccine has been developed, the only effective way to prevent the spread of SARS is to prevent contact with persons infected with it. FLIR Systems <www.flir.com>, has developed a thermal-imaging security camera, used at airports, hospitals and other locations in Taiwan and Korea. These cameras will be used to help detect fever, a possible precursor to severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). The cameras can accurately measure temperature and can be programmed to detect body temperature. Airline passengers and visitors to hospitals and other locations will be asked to look into the infrared camera for a matter of seconds, which allows the camera to record facial temperature.

What is the U.S. Government Doing About SARS?

On May 7, 2003, the U.S. Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations held a hearing entitled "SARS: Assessment, Outlook and Lessons Learned," at which Dr. Lonberg, representing Medarex <www.medarex.com> and Massachusetts Biologic Laboratories (MBL) of the University of Massachusetts <www.umassmed.edu/service/massbiolabs>, provided testimony addressing the potential of antibodies as a distinct class of biopharmaceutical therapeutics that could be developed to combat infectious diseases like severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).

Dr. Burger, representing AVI Biopharma <www.avibio.com>, presented information AVI's rapid response NEUGENE(R) antisense platform, an experimental SARS antisense compound developed within 10 days of receiving the genetic sequence of the virus from several sources including the Centers for Disease Control and World Health Organization (WHO) laboratories.

Other expert witnesses included members from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services <www.hhs.gov>, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases <www.niaid.nih.gov>, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration <www.fda.gov>, the U.S. General Accounting Office <www.gao.gov> and various public health organizations and drug research companies.

Once the findings of the hearing have been processed, the Oversight subcommittee will issue a report, which can then be used by government health organizations to inform the public of potential options for prevention, treatment and vaccination.

Sources

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