

The Coronal Virus and Challenge to Our Neighborhoods

Thursday February 27, 2020

In December 2019 a new virus appeared in a large city, Wuhan, of China. China is the most populous country in the world with 1.4 billion people and has the world's second largest economy. The virus has genetic similarities to both SARS and MERS but spreads much more rapidly and is more difficult to detect. Data from China and other Asian countries indicate that 1-4% of cases result in death. China reports 80,000 cases and 2,800 deaths. China's response has been to attempt to use quarantines to stop travel extending to work and shopping to slow the spread of the disease. The large numbers of cases have overwhelmed medical and hospital resources. The result has been a sharp decline in China's economy that affects Texas and Austin, as China is the second largest source of goods imported from any country in the world and the third largest customer of Texas exports. This means that there is substantial travel between China and cities in Texas, of course Austin, raising the possibility of infections occurring.

In the two months, January and February of this year, the world has become aware of the epidemic in China and as the virus has spread to 30 other countries, it is now labeled a pandemic. An important question is will the virus come to Austin. There are no known cases in Austin but there are 6 in San Antonio. All these cases are Americans that were traveling in Asia many on cruise ships and repatriated from Asia by the United States government returning exposed persons to military bases, including Lackland in San Antonio for quarantine.

There are estimated to be 60 confirmed cases in the United States. The cases come from persons that have had contact with persons that have the virus. Cases now exist in over 34 countries and travel is a significant vector for the spread of the disease.

Because Austin has large numbers of visitors every day, that increases the exposure to the virus. There are more than 40,000 state employees many of whom travel by air. There are over 50,000 students, most of whom travel by air and several thousand employees of companies that have significant travel to both coasts and overseas. This high level of Austin connectedness to the world may increase the possibility of the virus appearing in Austin.

The symptoms of the disease are like the flu: nasal and chest congestion, fatigue, coughing. Older persons, men more than women are more susceptible. Specific testing techniques or kits are not yet available in Texas, now only available in California, Nebraska and Washington. Settings such as airports, concerts, crowded streets, and restaurants increase the risk of infection via airborne particles as well as direct physical contact. Facial masks and protective eye ware may reduce exposure. Importantly there is developing evidence that some persons may have the virus but show no symptoms. They will not be detected by current tests.

The important thing to keep in mind is that modern air travel can bring the infection to Texas from both coasts in no more time than driving from Houston to El Paso! Twice that time brings travelers from China, Japan, South Korea, Italy or France, all locations where high levels of infection exist.

One of the state's best references for this disease and what to do is this site at the State Health Department:

<https://www.dshs.texas.gov/coronavirus/>

Here is the UT Austin site:

<https://healthyhorns.utexas.edu/coronavirus.html>

Here is the Centers for Disease Control

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

Austin Regional Clinic

<https://www.austinregionalclinic.com/news-and-events/article/clinics/austin-regional-clinic-responds-to-concerns-about-coronavirus>