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SARS-like novel coronavirus does not yet have pandemic potential: study

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USPA News - The new novel coronavirus, which emerged in the Middle East last year, is "not yet" spreading fast enough to have pandemic potential, a mathematical study suggests. It comes as another patient died from the SARS-like virus, raising the global death toll to 43. Researchers from the Emerging Diseases Epidemiology Unit at the Pasteur Institute in Paris used a measurement called the basic reproduction number, or R value, to determine whether the virus is presently posing an immediate threat to reach pandemic potential.

But the mathematical study found the rate of human-to-human transmission is lower than SARS. The researchers used data from the World Health Organization (WHO) and published descriptions of novel coronavirus cases, which has recently become known as the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV). It took into account 55 of the now more than 70 laboratory-confirmed cases. Using their most optimistic scenario, the researchers estimate the novel coronavirus has a basic reproduction number of 0.60, compared to 0.80 for the pre-pandemic SARS virus. When the basic reproduction number is greater than 1.0, the number of cases can grow exponentially and lead to a full-blown pandemic. But their most pessimistic scenario put the basic reproduction number at 0.69. They noted that, because of the recent implementation of effective contact tracing and isolation procedures, further transmission data might no longer describe an entire cluster, but only secondary infections directly caused by the index patient. As a result, the French researchers calculated that, under the pessimistic scenario which puts the value at 0.69, eight or more secondary infections caused by the next index patient would translate into a 5 percent or higher chance that the revised basic reproduction number would exceed 1. "Our analysis suggests that MERS-CoV does not yet have pandemic potential," the researchers wrote in their study, which was published on Friday in the medical journal *The Lancet*. "We recommend enhanced surveillance, active contact tracing, and vigorous searches for the MERS-CoV animal hosts and transmission routes to human beings." Also on Friday, health officials in England confirmed that a patient died at a London hospital late last month after suffering from the novel coronavirus for more than nine months. He had been flown to St Thomas' Hospital in central London from Qatar in September 2012, but his condition did not improve. "Guy's and St Thomas' can confirm that the patient with severe respiratory illness due to novel coronavirus (MERS-nCoV) sadly died on Friday 28 June, after his condition deteriorated despite every effort and full supportive treatment," the hospital said in a brief statement, giving no other details. The new coronavirus first emerged in the Middle East last year and is now known to have infected more than 70 people, including 43 people who died from the illness. The disease appeared at a health care facility in Saudi Arabia's eastern province of Ahsaa in May and infected at least fifteen patients, more than a month after the last case of the virus had been reported. Later in May, France confirmed the country's first case of the novel coronavirus in a patient who recently traveled to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, where another case had been reported in March. The victim eventually died, and a second person who shared a hospital room in Valenciennes with the first patient remains in a critical condition with the same illness. Experts are still unsure how people are being infected, whether it is from animals, from contaminated surfaces, or from other people. And although there is no evidence yet of continuous human-to-human transmission, the World Health Organization (WHO) has said it appears likely that the virus is able to pass from person-to-person in the event of close contact. WHO Director-General Margaret Chan sounded the alarm over the virus during her closing remarks at the 66th World Health Assembly in late May, warning that the virus "poses a threat to the entire world" and urging the international community to come together to combat the threat. "The novel coronavirus is not a problem that any single affected country can keep to itself or manage all by itself. The novel coronavirus is a threat to the entire world," Chan said. "Through WHO and the IHR, we need to bring together the assets of the entire world in order to adequately address this threat. We need more information, and we need it quickly, urgently."

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