

From the Office of the Medical Health Officer
Fraser East
Abbotsford, Chilliwack, Mission and
Fraser Cascade School Districts

March 31, 2003

Dear Parent or Guardian:

You have probably been seeing and hearing a lot of information through newspapers, TV and radio about Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Several parents have asked if schools need to do anything special to protect against this infection. This letter is written to help answer such questions.

The World Health Organization has received reports of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in several parts of the world, including Canada. You may have heard this syndrome referred to as 'atypical pneumonia' as well. You will have heard that this syndrome is related to travel in certain parts of Asia.

SYMPTOMS

The main symptoms of SARS are similar to many common illnesses such as influenza. People with SARS have fever, dry cough, shortness of breath or breathing difficulties. Unlike influenza or other common respiratory illnesses, SARS is linked with travel to certain parts of Asia or close contact with someone who is sick with SARS.

CAUSE

At this time, the cause of the SARS illness isn't known for sure. There is provincial, national and international laboratory testing and cooperation to find the cause. You probably have heard of some of the progress and some of the difficulties in finding the cause, learning more about treatment and trying to develop a vaccine.

NUMBER OF CASES

Health Canada is monitoring confirmed reports of outbreaks of SARS in China (Guangdong Province and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region), Vietnam (City of Hanoi) and Singapore, and the occurrence of isolated cases in other countries.

As of 31 March 2003, Health Canada has reports of 98 people in Canada who have become ill with SARS

- Ontario: 81 probable and suspect cases, 4 deaths. All cases have occurred in people who have travelled to Asia or had contact with SARS cases in the household or in a health-care setting.
- British Columbia: total of 2 probable and 8 suspect cases. No transmission to any individuals including health care professionals has occurred.

AIRPORTS, HOSPITALS AND DOCTORS' OFFICES

Surveillance is in place at airports for passengers leaving areas where an outbreak of SARS is occurring and on arrival in Canada. Hospitals and doctors' offices have information about SARS. The BC HealthGuide NurseLine is prepared to respond to people with symptoms or questions. The NurseLine phone is 604-215-4700 or 1-866-215-4700.

SCHOOLS

Public Health will alert school districts immediately if there is any special concern in a school or group of schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PUBLIC HEALTH

Parents have called with questions about school children and staff returning from travel to Asia.

Healthy students and staff who have travelled to the affected areas in Asia, but have not been in contact with a person with SARS, CAN attend school.

Also:

- Children in school should wash hands well. Hand washing is the single most important procedure for preventing many infections.
- Staff or students who have travelled to the high-risk sites of China (Guangdong Province and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region), Vietnam (City of Hanoi) or Singapore should monitor their health for 10 days following their departure from these areas, but may attend school and work. **If any of these people get a high fever and one or more of cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, they need to stay away from school and other public places and contact a doctor right away. They should call ahead to their doctor to tell about symptoms and travel.**

- As always, staff or students with fever, cough, breathing difficulty or other symptoms of respiratory illness should stay home to reduce spread of other common respiratory illnesses.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT SARS

Up-to-date information is available on many websites. For more information that is regularly updated, the following websites are available:

WHO: <http://www.who.int/csr/sars/en/>

Health Canada: www.hc-sc.gc.ca

BCCDC: www.bccdc.org

Fraser Health: <http://www.fraserhealth.ca>

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Travel information may change. At this time, the following Health Canada Travel Advisory is in place:

Due to concern about transmission of the SARS agent in non-hospital and community settings in the City of Hanoi, Vietnam; the People’s Republic of China, including Hong Kong; and Singapore, Health Canada recommends that people planning to travel to these areas should defer all travel until further notice. Health Canada also recommends that alternate routing be considered if a traveler is transiting through one of these areas.

There is no travel advisory for Toronto, Canada at this time.

You should be able to find current Travel Advisories on the websites in this letter.

For more information contact your local health unit office at the numbers below.

Abbotsford	604-864-3400
Agassiz/Harrison.....	604-793-7160
Chilliwack.....	604-702-4900
Hope	604-869-5661
Mission.....	604-814-5500