



China coronavirus: WHO declares international emergency as death toll exceeds 200

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The World Health Organization has declared the current novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) outbreak to be a public health emergency of international concern, as latest figures show that nearly 10 000 people have been infected and that over 200 have died.

WHO's emergency committee reconvened on 30 January—a week after it first met—to reassess the situation. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO director general, said that the declaration was “not because of what is happening in China but because of what is happening in other countries.”

He warned, “Our greatest concern is for the virus to spread to countries with weaker health systems that are ill prepared to deal with it.”

The announcement was soon followed by the first two confirmed cases of the virus in the UK. Little detail has been provided on these cases, but the Department of Health and Social Care reported that the patients were from the same family and were receiving specialist NHS care.¹

The virus—believed to have originated from a seafood market in Wuhan, China, at the end of 2019—has infected nearly 10 000 people worldwide as of 31 January and has resulted in the deaths of 213 people.

At least 19 countries have now reported cases, although most are in China and no deaths have been reported elsewhere. Eight cases of human to human transmission have been seen in four countries: Germany, Japan, the US, and Vietnam.

Limiting further spread

Speaking at a press conference where he announced the decision to declare an international emergency, Ghebreyesus said, “Although the numbers [outside China] are relatively small compared to the numbers inside China, we must all act together now to limit further spread.”

In a statement after the conference WHO said, “The committee believes that it is still possible to interrupt virus spread, provided

that countries put in place strong measures to detect disease early, isolate and treat cases, trace contacts, and promote social distancing measures commensurate with the risk.”

It told countries to expect “further international exportation of cases.” Countries should ensure that they are prepared for containment, active surveillance, early detection, isolation and case management, contact tracing, and full data sharing with WHO, it added.

Jeremy Farrar, director of the UK biomedical research charity the Wellcome Trust, said, “This virus has spread at unprecedented scale and speed, with cases passing between people in multiple countries across the world. Declaration of an international emergency will undoubtedly sharpen governments' focus on protecting citizens.

“But we must also step up as an international community to make sure no one is left behind—with all interventions, including public health measures, diagnostics, treatments, and vaccines available to everyone.”

WHO also announced that it was sending a multidisciplinary team of experts to China to work with researchers on the ground. The mission should “review and support efforts to investigate the animal source of the outbreak, the clinical spectrum of the disease and its severity, the extent of human to human transmission in the community and in healthcare facilities, and efforts to control the outbreak,” the emergency committee said. Meanwhile, around 60 key research organisations and journals, including *The BMJ*, have signed a joint statement pledging to “rapidly and openly” share research data and findings relevant to the outbreak, to “inform the public health response and help save lives.”

¹ Department of Health and Social Care. @CMO_England statement on two confirmed cases in England. *Twitter*. 31 Jan 2020. <https://twitter.com/DHSCgovuk/status/1223176258030309377>.