

## **POLICY ON SEVERE ACUTE RESPIRATORY SYNDROME (SARS)**

*Approved 22.5.03*

The AFTRS takes its responsibility to protect the health, safety and well being of all employees seriously. This includes taking all reasonable practicable steps to protect employees from the risk of contracting diseases including SARS. This policy establishes a procedure to minimise the risk to staff of exposure to SARS.

### **What is SARS?**

SARS is a virus that has recently come to prominence. According to the Australian Department of Health and Ageing SARS is not highly contagious, however most states have declared SARS a notifiable disease under public health laws and the Commonwealth has included it as “quarantinable” which means they have the power to treat people with SARS and/or quarantine them.

### **What are the symptoms?**

The symptoms include high fever (over 38° Celsius) and a cough with shortness of breath or breathing difficulties. Changes in chest X-rays indicative of pneumonia may also occur. Sneezing is not generally associated with SARS.

### **Who is most at risk?**

The World Health Organisation has determined that the people most at risk (i.e. suspect cases) are those with the above symptoms who have either had close contact with someone suspected of having SARS, a history of traveling to an affected area, or who have resided in an affected area.

### **Which areas are “affected”?**

The World Health Organisation regularly updates the areas they have determined are affected. SARS affected areas can be found on the Department of Health and Ageing website at [www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au).

It has been recommended by the World Health Organisation and Australian authorities that all non-essential travel to these areas, especially China and Toronto, be postponed.

### **What do I do if I’m traveling to an affected area?**

If you are unable to postpone travel to an affected area you need to be aware that most countries have now put in place methods of assessing whether travelers are at a high level of risk and ill passengers are not being accepted onto flights in many countries. It is recommended that travelers to affected areas wear masks and ensure they wash their hands regularly to reduce the likelihood of the transmission of the disease.

As the incubation period of the SARS virus is 10 days some countries are considering bringing in, or have initiated, compulsory treatment and quarantine provisions.

## **What procedure is the AFTRS implementing to protect employees?**

If you are traveling to an affected area you may not be permitted to return to duty until you either present a medical clearance or 10 days have elapsed since your return to Australia.

### ***Procedure***

On your return to Australia you should determine whether you have traveled in an identified SARS area within the previous 10 days.

If you have not been in a SARS affected area you may return to AFTRS immediately.

If you have been in a SARS affected area or in contact with a suspected or probably case of SARS in the previous 10 days the following applies.

1. If you are well following travel in a SARS affected area you may return immediately to AFTRS but must monitor your health for 10 days, especially for a fever or cough.
2. If you have a fever over 38° C and a cough you must seek immediate medical attention. Contact the medical facility in advance and attempt to arrange a home consultation. Unless pathology tests establish a diagnosis different from SARS you may not return to AFTRS until at least 10 days after the onset of the fever and not until the symptoms have gone.
3. If you have had contact with a suspected case of SARS (someone with a fever over 38° C, a cough and/or breathing difficulty, and who has either had close contact with someone suspected of having SARS, a history of travel to a SARS affected area, or has resided in a SARS affected area) but are well you may return to AFTRS but monitor your health.
4. If you have had contact with a probably case of SARS (someone who has a suspected case of SARS who also has radiographic evidence consistent with pneumonia or respiratory distress syndrome) but are well you should monitor your health and not return to AFTRS until 10 days after the contact ended, and only if you have no symptoms.
5. If you have had contact with either a suspected or probably case of SARS and have either a cough or fever you must contact the local Public Health Unit and may not return to AFTRS until at least 10 days after the onset of the fever and not until the symptoms have gone.

## **Payment for the “Quarantine” Period**

If a quarantine period is required you must contact Human Resources immediately.

You will receive your normal salary without leave deductions for the period of leave up to the end of the quarantine period (i.e. 10 days). You must access Personal

Leave for any further necessary absences. Should you have no paid Personal Leave credits you may be given access to other forms of paid leave.

If you are required to be absent from AFTRS for more than 10 days and your travel to an affected areas was work related please contact Human Resources to discuss alternatives.

## **Where can I get more information?**

For more information on the process please contact Human Resources. For information on your available leave credits please contact Payroll.

For information on SARS:

Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing National information phone line available 7 days per week from 9am to 8pm EST - 1800 004 599

World Health Organisation web site

[www.who.int/csr/sars/en/](http://www.who.int/csr/sars/en/)

Public Health Laboratory Service UK

[www.phls.co.uk](http://www.phls.co.uk)

Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing

[www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au)

Commonwealth Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

[www.dfat.gov.au](http://www.dfat.gov.au)

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

*(Based on the web sites of the Department of Health and Ageing and the Public Health Laboratory Services UK)*

*What is SARS?*

SARS is a serious respiratory illness probably caused by a new virus of animal origin.

*Is SARS common?*

No. Other causes of infection in the respiratory tract are far more common than SARS. Most people who have cough and fever will not have SARS but will have another common viral illness.

*How contagious is SARS?*

Based on currently available evidence, close contact with an infected person poses the highest risk of spreading the disease. To date the majority of cases have occurred in hospital workers who have cared for SARS patients and the close family members of these patients.

*What can I do to protect myself?*

Only a few cases have been identified outside of South East Asia and these cases were in people who had traveled from there, mainly in Canada. The best advice is to be aware of the symptoms of this illness, particularly if you have recently traveled to an affected area, and seek medical advice should you develop them within 10 days of your return.

*Is there a vaccine for SARS?*

No. Not enough is known yet to develop a vaccine.

*If I were exposed to SARS how long would it take for me to become sick?*

Most cases have become unwell between 2 and 7 days after exposure to a person ill with SARS. In some cases it has been up to 10 days.

*Can SARS be treated with antibiotics or other drugs?*

Treatment is with medications that are effective against diseases that cause similar symptoms. There is no specific treatment for SARS itself.

*How is SARS spread?*

Droplets from infected cases as a result of coughing carry the virus to close contact or contaminate objects for a short period of time.

*Can SARS kill?*

The mortality rate of SARS is believed to be less than 5% of people known to be infected.