

Situational Report on China's Respiratory Season

In December 2024, China's National Disease Control and Prevention Administration (China CDC) announced implementing a pilot monitoring system for pneumonia of unknown origin. This initiative aims to enhance the country's preparedness for emerging respiratory diseases, especially during the winter months when such infections are expected to rise. The health administration in China has optimized the network reporting system for infectious diseases to monitor acute respiratory infectious diseases, including COVID-19 and influenza, at 1,041 sentinel hospitals across all cities and representative counties. Some of these sentinel hospitals have also been selected to monitor common respiratory pathogens. The China CDC releases multi-pathogen monitoring results to the public on a weekly basis and provides health advisories.

In the 52nd week of 2024 (December 23-December 29), respiratory samples from outpatient and emergency influenza-like cases and hospitalised severe acute respiratory infection cases collected in sentinel hospitals across the country (excluding Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan) were tested for 10 viruses including the new coronavirus, influenza virus, respiratory syncytial virus, adenovirus, human metapneumovirus (HMPV), parainfluenza virus, common coronavirus, bocavirus, rhinovirus and enterovirus, as well as multiple respiratory pathogens including *Mycoplasma pneumoniae*.

This proactive approach reflects lessons learned from past outbreaks, such as the emergence of COVID-19, and underscores China's commitment to strengthening its disease surveillance and response systems. Recent data indicate an increase in acute respiratory infections, with pathogens like rhinovirus and HMPV on the rise, particularly among children under 14 in the northern provinces. Health experts have cautioned against using antiviral

drugs for human metapneumovirus, which lacks a vaccine and presents symptoms similar to a cold.

Many media agencies have reported concerns related to HMPV, suggesting this is a pathogen of concern. However, HMPV is a common respiratory virus. It belongs to a family of viruses called pneumoviridae, the same group the respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) belongs to. Symptoms of HMPV infection are mild cold-like symptoms such as sneezing, coughing, a runny nose, or a sore throat for a few days. More serious symptoms may be reported in rare cases, especially amongst those with weakened immune systems or other risk factors. Anyone can get it, but it's more common in those who are very young or older. Dutch scientists discovered it over 20 years ago, and updated research shows that HMPV has been the source of respiratory infections globally for over 50 years.

Based on a risk assessment tool for South Africa, the risk of importing respiratory illnesses from China is low. South Africa's robust syndromic respiratory illness surveillance system, run by the Centre for Respiratory Diseases and Meningitis at the National Institute for Communicable Disease, will continue to monitor the local data for any changes in disease patterns while being on the alert for anything unusual through the Outbreak Response Unit's event-based surveillance including media monitoring.