

Human Metapneumovirus (HMPV)

Another Seasonal Problem

THE world is still grappling with the after-effects of the global pandemic, COVID-19, and since then, various seasonal respiratory infections have been taking a big toll on our health. Now, Human Metapneumovirus (HMPV) has surfaced as a new concern. The virus is not new, it has been around us for years. However, due to the increasing number of detected cases, it is receiving much attention nowadays. Initially, the virus was overshadowed by other more prominent seasonal respiratory infections like influenza or other acute respiratory infections. However, the rising number of cases is a matter of public health concern, which needs more consideration and awareness, especially in nations with high population densities like India. In the past few weeks, there have been several reports highlighting the cases of HMPV in various countries. Though India has so far reported with a few cases, but it is important to remain vigilant.

First detected in 2001, HMPV belongs to the Pneumoviridae family along with Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV, a common cause of cough and cold). Anyone can become infectious with HMPV, including infants, young children, the elderly, and individuals with weak immunity or ones with health conditions like asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease.

Fever, cough, nasal congestion, and shortness of breath are some of the common symptoms associated with the virus. However, clinical signs of the infection are similar to those of other viruses that cause upper and lower respiratory infections, and they can develop into bronchitis or pneumonia. According to the expert comment at Science Media Centre, Prof. John Tregoning, Professor in Vaccine Immunology at Imperial College London, said, “HMPV (Human Metapneumovirus) is not a new virus; it was first isolated in 2001 but most likely has been circulating for much longer. It has very similar symptoms (in children, at least) to RSV (Respiratory Syncytial Virus). It is part of the cocktail of winter viruses that we are exposed to.”

Most likely the virus transmits from an infected person to others by secretions from sneezing and coughing and intimate physical contact, including shaking or touching hands. It also spreads by touching the mouth, nose, or eyes after coming into contact with items or surfaces that contain the virus on them.

At the beginning of January, the World Health Organization released a disease outbreak news titled “Trends of Acute Respiratory Infection, including Human Metapneumovirus, in the Northern Hemisphere”, according to which the Northern Hemisphere is experiencing a noticeable increase in the number of cases of acute respiratory infections, including HMPV, with the co-circulation of other various respiratory viruses, which ultimately contribute to the overall burden on healthcare systems during the winter season. Public health experts are closely monitoring the situation and urging preventive measures to reduce the effect of these infections.

Maintaining good hygiene, avoiding close contact with infected people, wearing a mask in crowded or poorly ventilated spaces, keeping our environments clean, improving ventilation, and strengthening the immune system are all important measures of protection from the virus. Being proactive and well-informed about HMPV and its transmission can help manage the risks of the virus more effectively, particularly during times when respiratory diseases are more prevalent.

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