
Prelims and Mains focus: about the coronavirus and its spread across the world; measures taken by the Indian government in this regard

News: India reported its first case of novel coronavirus. An Indian student of Wuhan University in China tested positive in Kerala.

- This has put the focus on the extent of preparedness in the world’s second-most populous nation to deal with a virus that has wreaked havoc in neighbouring China and is spreading swiftly across the world.

Background

The Indian case was announced as experts at the World Health Organization prepared to meet to decide whether to declare the outbreak a global epidemic.

Where did the virus originate?

- Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province in central China, is the epicentre of the outbreak. But the infection has spread to all 31 provinces of China, killing 170 people and infecting another 7,711. Across the world, it has been reported in 21 countries, including India.

Is India prepared?

- With the virus having entered India, monitoring and surveillance will have to be stepped up to prevent its further spread.

- As there is no vaccine or drug available against the virus, the cases are managed according to their symptoms.

- N-CoV is fatal but exact fatality is not estimated and how the virus will behave in the new population is also not known. Therefore, prevention and
strict surveillance is very important in India.

- When we talk about India, the cities here are overpopulated and the poor living conditions, inadequate amenities, poor waste management, unhygienic habits and practices, and the degraded sewerage system help spread viruses here with tremendous rapidity.

- On the whole, the environment under which the virus grows has become dominant. At the same time, the possibilities of close contacts have become stronger due to concentration of people.

Measures taken by the govt.

- Stepping up its preparedness, the central government said that isolation wards have been readied in hospitals across all states and Union territories (UTs) to face any contingency.

- Personal protection equipment and masks are available in adequate quantities in all the states and UTs.

- Health authorities continued to screen all passengers coming from China and Hong Kong at over 21 airports.

- The government is procuring more of the thermal screening sensors that are operational in airports. Immigration and other staff members at airports have been sensitized and ambulances are on standby. Medical and paramedical staff are being deployed in shifts for round-the-clock service.

What is the criteria for declaring global health emergency?

The WHO declares a Public Health Emergency of International Concern when there is "an extraordinary event which is determined… to constitute a public health risk to other states through the international spread of disease".
It has previously declared five global public health emergencies:

1. **Swine flu, 2009** - The H1N1 virus spread across the world in 2009, killing more than 200,000 people.

2. **Polio, 2014** - Although closer than ever to eradication in 2012, polio numbers rose in 2013.

3. **Zika, 2016** - The WHO declared Zika a public health emergency in 2016 after the disease spread rapidly through the Americas.

4. **Ebola, 2014 and 2019** - The first emergency over the virus lasted from August 2014 to March 2016 as almost 30,000 people were infected and more than 11,000 died in West Africa. A second emergency was declared last year as an outbreak spread in DR Congo.