

Common disinfectants enough to kill virus: study

AFP, Washington

New research from Singapore published Wednesday showed that patients with the novel coronavirus extensively contaminate their bedrooms and bathrooms, underscoring the need to routinely clean high-touch surfaces, basins and toilet bowls.

The virus was however killed by twice-a-day cleaning of surfaces and daily cleaning of floors with a commonly used disinfectant -- suggesting that current decontamination measures are sufficient as long as people adhere to them.

The research letter was published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) and comes after cases in China where the pathogen spread extensively through hospitals, infecting dozens of health care workers and other patients.

This led scientists to believe that, beyond catching the infection through coughing, environmental contamination was an important factor in the disease's transmission, but its extent was unclear.

Researchers at Singapore's National Centre for Infectious Diseases and DSO National Laboratories looked at the cases of three patients who were held in isolation rooms between late January and early February.

They collected samples from their rooms on five days over a two-week period.

The room of one patient was sampled before routine cleaning, while the rooms of the other two patients were sampled after disinfection measures.

The patient whose room was sampled before cleaning had the mildest symptoms of the three, only experiencing a cough. The other two had moderate symptoms: both had coughing and fever, one experienced shortness of breath and the other was coughing up mucus.



A member of the Syrian Civil Defence, also known as the "White Helmets", carries a child after she was recovered from debris in the town of Maaret Misrin following Syrian government forces airstrikes yesterday in Syria's northwestern Idlib province.

PHOTO: AFP

Russian strikes kill 15 civilians in Syria

AFP, Maaret Misrin

Russian air strikes yesterday killed at least 15 civilians including a child in Syria's last major opposition bastion of Idlib, a Britain-based war monitor said.

The strikes after midnight targeted an area where displaced Syrians had gathered outside the town of Maaret Misrin, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

An AFP correspondent saw the bodies of some of the victims wrapped in thick winter blankets at a local hospital. A rescuer carried in the body of a baby girl, her pink pyjamas caked in dust.

At the site of the strikes, two large one-storey buildings lay mostly in rubble near green orchards, and rescuers operated bulldozers to comb through the debris.

The strikes destroyed the poultry farm where the displaced families had been living, and dozens of chickens could be seen picking through the dust.

The Observatory said the death toll was likely to rise further as many wounded were in critical condition.

The strikes comes on the day the leaders of Russia and Turkey were meeting in Moscow to discuss the situation in Idlib. Ankara backs some rebel groups in the northwestern region and has become directly involved in fighting in recent weeks.

Moscow-backed regime forces have since December waged a deadly battle against the jihadist-dominated Idlib region, causing almost a million people -- mostly women and children -- to flee their homes and shelters.

Even before that offensive, Idlib was home to three million people, around half of them already displaced from other parts of the war-torn country.

Delhi shuts schools till March 31

NDTV ONLINE

Amid the coronavirus scare, the Delhi government has ordered the immediate closure of all primary schools in the national capital till March 31.

Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia tweeted all primary schools will be closed as a "precautionary measure to prevent the possibility of spread of COVID-19."

All Delhi government, aided, private and schools run by civic bodies will remain shut, said Sisodia, who also holds the education portfolio.

In India, 30 positive cases have been reported so far, including 16 Italian tourists. Fourteen of the 16 infected Italian tourists are quarantined in Delhi. They were a part of a group of 23 Italians, which traveled to Rajasthan last month. One of them - currently in Jaipur - tested positive on Tuesday; his wife has also tested positive. This is the biggest group in the country to be infected with the coronavirus.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted on Wednesday that he would not participate in any Holi events this year. "Experts across the world have advised to reduce mass gatherings to avoid the spread of COVID-19 Novel Coronavirus. Hence, this year, I have decided not to participate in any Holi Milan programme," he wrote. Union Home Minister Amit Shah also tweeted an appeal to "everyone to avoid public gatherings" and said that he, too, would not participate in any Holi events.

India has now stepped up preventative measures including barring visitors from Italy, Iran, South Korea and Japan, except diplomats and officials from international bodies.

SPREAD OF CORONAVIRUS ACROSS THE GLOBE

Panic buying defies caution

AFP, Hong Kong

Shelves are being stripped bare of toilet rolls, hand sanitiser and surgical masks everywhere from Japan to France to the United States as panic buying criss-crosses the globe with the coronavirus, defying repeated calls for calm and disrupting supply chains.

Obsessively documented on social media, scrambles to the shops and empty shelves are adding panic and confusion to the fight against an epidemic that has killed thousands, placed millions under quarantine and battered global markets.

Australia's biggest supermarket this week began rationing sales of toilet paper after police had to be called to a shop in Sydney when a knife was drawn in a scuffle over the scarce commodity.

On Saturday Japan's prime minister took to Twitter to calm fears of a national shortage, while social media photos from the US show toilet paper shelves lying bare.

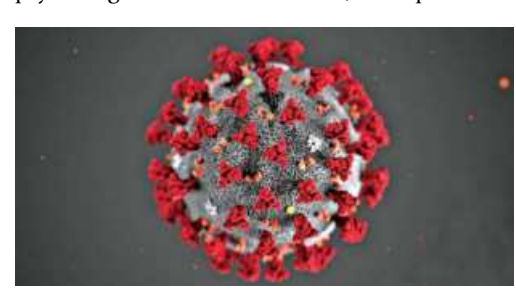
Psychologists say a mix of herd mentality and over-exposure to coverage of the virus is to blame.

"We might be less irrational if we weren't being reminded so much of the potential dangers by the news," London-based consumer

psychologist Kate Nightingale told AFP.

"We either avoid the topic or we go completely nuts and stock up on anything we might just need."

Panic buying of non-medical items like toilet paper "gives people this sense of control that 'I will have what I need when I want'," Andy Yap, a psychologist and Charlene Chen, who specialises



in marketing and business in Singapore told AFP in an email.

The city-state experienced its own recent run on toilet paper, traceable, they said to a "believable" rumour of an impending shortage due to shutdowns in virus-stricken China, a major producer.

Endlessly scrolling through social media also "distorts our perceptions and makes us think that things are a lot more serious than they truly

are," they said.

As the uncertainty grows, they added, items such as surgical masks and hand sanitiser transform into "problem-solving goods... that seemingly help people gain control over the virus."

In London, masks are now going for more than 100 times their normal retail price, while French authorities said they will requisition all face mask stocks and production.

The demand is being "driven by panic buying, stockpiling and speculation," World Health Organization spokeswoman Fadelia Chaib told AFP.

This is despite the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention saying it did not "recommend the use of facemasks" to help combat the outbreak.

But in crowded, paranoid cities where others are already wearing them, donning a mask can be comforting -- if ineffective.

As more countries report new cases, Yap and Chen said it was important for authorities to "re-establish control" over information and rumours that spark hoarding and panic-buying.

"In times of uncertainty, it is good to set rules because rules provide a sense of order and control."

EU backs Greece, rejects Turkish 'use of migrants'

AFP, Brussels

EU members on Wednesday rejected what they said is Turkey's use of desperate migrants to pressure its neighbours -- and strongly backed Greece's border crackdown.

In a statement agreed by European interior ministers meeting in Brussels, the 27 capitals said the "situation at the EU's external borders is not acceptable".

Earlier, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government had denied that it was using the threat of a wave of migrants to "blackmail" the EU.

But the EU statement said the bloc "strongly rejects Turkey's use of migratory pressure for political purposes".

Ankara wants Brussels to step up support for the 3.7 million refugees and migrants that Turkey is already hosting, and back Turkey in its increasingly intense confrontation with the Syrian regime.

But EU members insist Turkey must stick to a previous deal in which Brussels agreed to pay billions of euros in exchange for Turkey preventing refugees and migrants from crossing to Greece.

"Illegal crossings will not be tolerated," the EU statement said. "In this regard, the EU and its Member States will take all necessary measures, in accordance with EU and international law.

"Migrants should not be encouraged to endanger their lives by attempting illegal crossings by land or sea."

The ministers urged Turkey to "relay this message and counter the dissemination of false information".

The ministers also strongly backed fellow member Greece, despite the United Nations refugee agency warning that Greece's suspension of asylum claims has no legal basis.



Migrant families gather near the Tunca river waiting to resume their efforts to enter Europe near the Pazarkule border gate in the city of Edirne, northwest Turkey, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Coronavirus fears: man locks wife in bathroom

Police in Lithuania intervened in a domestic dispute on Wednesday after a man locked his wife in the bathroom over fears that she may be carrying the coronavirus. The woman reportedly told her husband she may have caught the disease new coronavirus when she spoke with a person who had arrived from abroad. "Police officers arrived, there was no violence, no complaint, therefore an ambulance was called," the police spokesman said. Local media reported that the woman tested negative for the presence of the new coronavirus, which has so far infected one person in Lithuania, an EU Baltic state of 2.8 million people. The 39-year-old male victim had recently returned from Verona in an area of northern Italy that has recorded Europe's highest number of deaths from the disease.

Latest Bond film release delayed on virus fears

The makers of the new James Bond movie due for global release next month said on Wednesday it would be delayed until November amid fears over the new coronavirus outbreak. The film, "No Time to Die", had been set to have its premiere in London on March 31, before its rollout worldwide in April. "MGM, Universal and Bond producers, Michael G. Wilson and Barbara Broccoli, announced today that after careful consideration and thorough evaluation of the global theatrical marketplace, the release of NO TIME TO DIE will be postponed until November 2020," said a tweet from the official 007 Twitter account.



Brawl in Turkish House after MP criticises Erdogan

A fistfight erupted in the Turkish parliament on Wednesday during a speech by an opposition lawmaker who earlier accused President Tayyip Erdogan of disrespecting Turkish soldiers who died in Syria. Dozens of parliamentarians joined the brawl, some climbing desks or throwing punches, while others tried to stop the fighting, according to video footage of the incident. Engin Ozkoc, a lawmaker from the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), had accused the president at a news conference and later in tweets of disrespecting soldiers who were killed last week in Syria's Idlib region. Ozkoc also accused Erdogan of irresponsibility for sending troops into a conflict without air cover.

SOURCE: AFP

From CO2 sink to source

Study says rising temperature may stop tropical forests from absorbing CO2 within 15 years

AFP, Paris

The world's tropical forests are rapidly losing their ability to absorb carbon dioxide from greenhouse gas emissions, with the Amazon rainforest at risk of turning from carbon sink to source within 15 years, researchers warned Wednesday.

Tropical forests provide humans with medicine, food, shelter and water and currently account for around half of all terrestrial carbon absorption.

But they are rapidly getting saturated as manmade emissions continue to climb year on year.

Forests act as a carbon sink when the amount of carbon retrieved through photosynthesis outweighs that emitted by tree loss -- be that through fire, drought or deforestation.

But the rate of forest decline varies throughout the world, with the Amazon's absorption ability dropping far faster than the tropical forests of sub-Saharan Africa.

A team of dozens of Europe- and Africa-based researchers monitored tree growth and mortality data from

undisturbed forests across 11 countries in Africa stretching back over 50 years.

They then compared that data with similar measurements taken across more than 300 plots of Amazon rainforest.

Their paper, published in the journal Nature, estimated that the carbon sink capacity of the African forests studied will decline 14 percent by 2030.

In the Amazon, the forest's carbon sink capacity is predicted to reach zero by 2035.

Despite evidence that in particular the Amazon has been losing its carbon sink ability for decades, several of the emissions reductions scenarios envisioned in the Paris climate deal assume forests will be able to suck CO2 from the atmosphere over the

long term.

Several countries have announced plans to plant more trees and many larger companies plan mass-scale afforestation schemes to offset their carbon emissions.

"We will have to rethink the climate models, but also climate mitigation strategies based on those models," said Hubau.



Trump hails Biden's 'incredible comeback'

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump on Wednesday hailed Democrat Joe Biden's "incredible comeback" in the primaries race and signaled how he will attack the new frontrunner, saying he was surrounded by far leftists.

"It was a great comeback for Joe Biden, an incredible comeback when you think about it," Trump told reporters at the White House the morning after the Democrats' Super Tuesday polls.

Biden is running as a moderate, in contrast to his leftist rival Bernie Sanders, but Trump insisted that some of the former vice president's "handlers are further left than Bernie. That's pretty scary."

In his first public comments on the dramatic events of Super Tuesday -- other than a series of mocking tweets -- Trump also said that Sanders could easily have won if liberal Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren had dropped out earlier, thereby not splitting his vote.

Trump noted that decisions by two centrists -- Pete Buttigieg and Amy Klobuchar -- to drop out and endorse Biden had electrified the previously struggling vice president's campaign.

Had Warren done something similar to help Sanders, then the self-described democratic socialist, who is calling for a political revolution, "would have won a lot of states."

"She was really a spoiler, because other people got out and those votes went to Joe. Those people really helped Joe, you know, by getting out early," Trump said.

"Had she gotten out, it would have been a very different situation, I think. It would have been a very different night."