

Agencies Weigh In On Coronavirus Outbreak

Coast Guard Provides Guidance for Maritime Industry

Editor's note: Visit the SIU website for the latest U.S. Coast Guard Marine Safety Bulletins concerning coronavirus.

By now, all Seafarers are probably aware that a respiratory illness caused by a novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV, hereafter referred to as coronavirus) is front and center on the world stage.

First detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, Peoples Republic of China, the virus has since spread globally. Already, as of mid-February, more than 1,000 deaths have been attributed to the virus in China and another 31,000 individuals in that country have been confirmed infected. Because Wuhan City is a major domestic and international transportation hub, odds are high that mariners and maritime commerce as well as airline and aviation workers worldwide could be affected.

A myriad of health agencies and stakeholder bodies have weighed in on the situation and provided an abundance of guidance on how mariners and other transportation-sector workers can best protect themselves from contracting the virus. These include, but are not limited to the World Health Organization (WHO), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), the U.S. Coast Guard, and several SIU-contracted companies. Following are some of the actions promulgated by the former entities:

The WHO on Jan. 30, 2020 declared the coronavirus outbreak constituted a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. One day later on Jan. 31, U.S. Health and Human Services (HHS) declared the coronavirus situation to be a Public Health Emergency in the United States. The agency then issued a quarantine order for specific airline passengers returning to the United States from the Hubei Province of China. Also on Jan. 31, President Trump issued a proclamation on the Suspension of Entry as Immigrants and Non-immigrants of Persons Who Pose a Risk of Transmitting 2019 Novel Coronavirus and Other Appropriate Measures to Address This Risk. The proclamation included temporary suspension of foreign nationals (with some exceptions such as vessel crew members) who were physically present in the People's Republic of China (excluding Hong Kong and Macau), during the 14-day period preceding their entry or attempted entry into the United States.

The CDC issued a Level 3 Travel Health Warning to avoid all nonessential travel to China and the U.S. Department of State increased its Travel Advisory for all of China to Level 4 ("Do not travel to China"). The CDC Travel Health Warning contains precautions to protect travelers and others if one must travel to China.

The U.S. Coast Guard in a Marine Safety Information Bulletin dated Feb. 2 issued the following guidance:

- Illness of a person onboard a vessel that may adversely affect the safety of a vessel or port facility is a hazardous condition per 33 CFR 160.216 and must be immediately reported to the U.S. Coast Guard Captain of the Port (COTP) under 33 CFR 160.206. Cases of persons who exhibit symptoms consistent with 2019-nCoV must be reported to the COTP. Such persons will be evaluated and treated on a case by case basis.

- Per 42 CFR 71.21, vessels destined for a U.S. port are required to report to the CDC any sick or deceased crew/passengers during the 15 days prior to arrival at a U.S. port. U.S. flagged commercial vessels are also advised to report ill crewmembers in accordance with the requirements of each foreign port called upon.

The Coast Guard further advised that vessel owners/operators and local stakeholders should

be aware of the following:

- Passenger vessels or any vessel carrying passengers that have been to China (excluding Hong Kong and Macau) or embarked passengers who have been in China (excluding Hong Kong and Macau) within the last 14 days will be denied entry into the United States. If all passengers exceed 14 days since being in China (excluding Hong Kong and Macau) and are symptom free, the vessel will be permitted to enter the United States to conduct normal operations. These temporary measures are in place to safeguard the American public.

- Non-passenger commercial vessels that have been to China (excluding Hong Kong and Macau) or embarked crewmembers who have been in China (excluding Hong Kong and Macau) within the last 14 days, with no sick crewmembers, will be permitted to enter the U.S. and conduct normal operations, with restrictions. Crewmembers on these vessels will be required under COTP authority to remain aboard the vessel except to conduct specific activities directly related to vessel cargo or provisioning operations.

- The Coast Guard considers it a hazardous condition under 33 CFR 160.216 if a crewmember who was in China (excluding Hong Kong and Macau) within the past 14 days is brought onboard the vessel during transit. This requires immediate notification to the nearest Coast Guard Captain of the Port.

- The Coast Guard will continue to review all "Notice of Arrivals" in accordance with current policies and will communicate any concerns stemming from sick or deceased crew or passengers to their Coast Guard chain of command and the cognizant CDC quarantine station, who will coordinate with local health authorities.

- Vessel masters shall inform Coast Guard boarding teams of any ill crewmembers on their vessel prior to embarking the team and Boarding Teams should verify the type of illnesses with CDC if concerns arise.

- Local industry stakeholders, in partnership with their Coast Guard Captain of the Port, should review and be familiar with section 5310 Procedures for Vessel Quarantine and Isolation, and Section 5320 – Procedures for Security Segregation of Vessels in their Area Maritime Security Plan.

- Local industry stakeholders, in partnership with their Coast Guard COTP, should review and be familiar with their Marine Transportation System Recovery Plan.

The ITF is closely following all advice from the WHO regarding the current outbreak. The body has called on all governments and transport companies to implement all measures available to them to limit the risk of transmission of the deadly coronavirus to transport workers globally. This is particularly important for seafarers and port workers, as well as airline, border and cruise workers, who are in the frontline of the outbreak.

WHO has advised governments to prepare for containment, including active surveillance, early detection, isolation, case management, contact tracing and prevention of the onward spread of infections. Governments were also prompted to act immediately and implement strict biosecurity protocols in airports and ports, including procedures to identify potentially infected passengers, crew and seafarers from areas of concern, to contain the outbreak and minimize any chance of exposure and safeguard workers from the deadly outbreak.

Moreover, WHO mandated that airlines, airports, cruise line operators, shipping companies and port operators must provide workers with the latest information regarding the outbreak, follow best practice in regard to health and safety protocols and supply of personal protective equipment,

put into effect procedures to identify symptomatic travelers, crew and/or workers, and set clear guidelines for workers managing suspected cases of infection.

Advice for the maritime industry, seafarers and dock workers

There is currently no vaccine to prevent coronavirus infection. The best way to protect yourself from infection is to avoid being exposed to this virus. In this vein, the International Maritime Health Association issued the following advice specifically for the maritime industry, seafarers and dock workers:

- Do not restrict embarkation/disembarkation of seafarers in non-affected ports.

- Do not restrict necessary ship visits by port agents, chaplains, service personnel and others.

- Do not visit food markets in China and avoid provision of fish and poultry in China.

- Do not consume raw eggs, milk, meat.

- Observe strict food hygiene to avoid cross contamination.

- Ensure facial protection is provided for all crew (5 pieces /per person).

- Provide influenza vaccination, alcohol-based hand sanitizer and facial protection for ship inspectors and other crew who travel to China.

- If a crew member on board falls sick and has been travelling to affected areas 2-12 days before embarkation, the person must stay in his/her cabin.

- If a crew member is sick on board a ship, fill out the maritime declaration of health and notify the relevant port authority and consult a healthcare provider in the next port.

In addition to the foregoing, WHO also released the following list of everyday actions from the United Nations mariners should take that can help prevent the spread of the virus:

- Frequently wash your hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

- Cover your mouth and nose with a flexed elbow or tissue when sneezing or coughing.

- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.

- Avoid close contact with anyone who has a fever or cough.

- Seek early medical help if you have a fever, cough and difficulty breathing, and share your travel history with healthcare providers.

- Avoid direct, unprotected contact with live animals and surfaces in contact with animals when visiting live markets in affected areas.

- Avoid eating raw or undercooked animal products and exercise care when handling raw meat, milk or eggs to avoid cross-contamination.

CDC Recommendations

While the immediate risk of this new virus to the American public is believed to be low at this time, everyone can do their part to help respond to this emerging public health threat:

- It's currently flu and respiratory disease season and CDC recommends getting a flu vaccine, taking everyday preventive actions to help stop the spread of germs, and taking flu antivirals if prescribed.

- If you are a healthcare provider, be on the lookout for people who recently traveled from China and have fever and respiratory symptoms.

- If you are a healthcare provider caring for a coronavirus patient or a public health responder, please take care of yourself and follow recommended infection control procedures.

- For people who have had close contact with someone infected with 2019-nCoV who develop symptoms, contact your healthcare provider, and tell them about your symptoms and your exposure to a coronavirus patient.

Other resources

The coronavirus virus outbreak is an emerging, rapidly evolving situation. The WHO (www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus) and CDC (www.go.usa.gov/wdDsW) will provide updated information, as well as updated guidance, as it becomes available.