

A distinct name is needed for the new coronavirus

An outbreak of unusual respiratory disease, initially dominated by pneumonia, in Wuhan, China, is caused by infection by a novel coronavirus. The new virus was initially named 2019-nCoV by WHO.¹⁻³

On Feb 11, 2020, WHO renamed the disease as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).⁴ That same day, the Coronavirus Study Group (CSG) of the International Committee on Virus Taxonomy posted a manuscript on *bioRxiv* in which they suggested designating 2019-nCoV as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) on the basis of a phylogenetic analysis of related coronaviruses.⁵ The CSG claimed that they did not intend to make any reference to SARS when introducing yet another virus name derived from the term SARS; however, SARS is a disease name, and to name new virus SARS-CoV-2 actually implies that it causes SARS or similar, especially to scientists without much knowledge of virology and to citizens in the public domain. The new name is also not consistent with the disease name COVID-19. SARS-CoV-2, as a naturally occurring virus, is different from all other SARS-like or SARS-related coronaviruses, which are characterised mainly by their genome sequence.

As of Feb 17, 2020, 2019-nCoV has caused 71 331 human infections and 1775 deaths in China and 24 other countries, and it is distinct from SARS-CoV in biological, epidemiological, and clinical features. Naming 2019-nCoV as SARS-CoV-2 is therefore truly misleading. For such an epidemic virus with apparent international concern, it deserves its own unique name.

2019-nCoV is still evolving, and it is too early to predict the outcome of the current outbreak. Some experts predicted that 2019-nCoV

could evolve to a low pathogenic but highly transmissible coronavirus, which might return every winter, like the virus that causes seasonal influenza.⁶ If this is the case, the name SARS-CoV-2 might have adverse effects on the social stability and economic development in countries where the virus is causing an epidemic, perhaps even around the world. People develop panic at the thought of a re-occurrence of SARS. Travellers and investors might not want to visit a country with an ongoing epidemic or even sporadic cases of SARS. People may also believe that, like SARS-CoV, 2019-nCoV will not re-emerge once the current outbreak ends; therefore, they might not be prepared to prevent 2019-nCoV infection in the near future and could lose a sense of alert.

On the basis of special clinical, virological, and epidemiological characteristics and the uncertainty of the novel coronavirus, to avoid the misleadingness and confusion, and to help scientists and the public with better communication, we, a group of virologists in China, suggest renaming SARS-CoV-2 as human coronavirus 2019 (HCoV-19). Such a name distinguishes the virus from SARS-CoV and keeps it consistent with the WHO name of the disease it causes, COVID-19.

We declare no competing interests.

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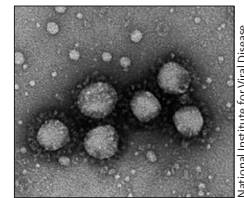


Image of 2019-nCoV by electron microscopy

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