Finland's first coronavirus case confirmed in Lapland

A Chinese tourist in Lapland has tested positive for novel coronavirus.

The patient was admitted to Lapland Central Hospital. Image: Kaisa Siren / Lehtikuva

A Chinese tourist who was admitted to hospital for tests after showing symptoms was confirmed to have the deadly new strain of coronavirus that has so far killed more than a hundred people in China.

Infectious diseases specialist Markku Broas from Lapland Central Hospital said that the tourist left the city of Wuhan five days before seeking treatment in Finland. Wuhan is the capital of Hubei province, which is the epicentre of the current outbreak, and shut down soon afterwards by Chinese authorities trying to stop the spread of the disease.

The tourist is said to be a female aged 32 and in relatively good health. She sought medical attention in Ivalo when symptoms first appeared. Samples were taken after a transfer to Lapland Central Hospital in Rovaniemi. Tests conducted in Helsinki confirmed the infection.

15 people possibly exposed

"It was to be expected that cases brought by visitors could also come to light in Finland. However the risk of the disease spreading in Finland is still very small, so there is no need for concern," said THL director Mika Salminen.

So far officials estimate that about 15 people may have been exposed to infection. Health authorities will monitor persons exposed to the risk of infection for 14 days, in accordance
with World Health Organization recommendations.

Lapland hospital specialist Broas said that the majority of people under observation after possible exposure to the disease are foreign nationals. "Travel restrictions in China will reduce the risk of infection," he noted.

Health officials from the Lapland hospital district as well as local health officials will continue to manage the situation in collaboration with the THL.

"Finland is prepared for possible cases. The health care system and laboratories have operating systems in place. Hospitals are also prepared to investigate and care for coronavirus infections in isolation wards," Salminen added.

Meanwhile THL officials said in a press conference Wednesday evening that the possible window for infection from this patient was likely very narrow. They added that there are no locations at Helsinki-Vantaa Airport where people might have been exposed to infection.

**Officials call for calm**

Lapland health officials said that the woman diagnosed with the virus had been in the Saariselkä area of northern Finland and began to exhibit symptoms last Sunday.

She is running a temperature but does not need intensive care, they noted. The patient will be double-tested to be sure that she is disease-free before she is released from quarantine.

Officials sought to calm fears by noting that the total number of coronavirus cases in Europe is now seven and that the European Union is well positioned to manage the disease.

They said that this isolated case should not cause concern in Finland, even if a few more cases are diagnosed. Members of the public are being advised to practice good hand and respiratory hygiene and to simply go about their usual business as the situation in Finland is not likely to change.

The public can consult the THL website for information on the Wuhan coronavirus strain. Officials also urged travellers to follow Foreign Ministry travel advisories.

**Previous suspected cases cleared**

The virus has spread to more than 16 countries so far, with more than 130 people dead and nearly 6,000 confirmed cases in China up to Wednesday afternoon.

Symptoms are very similar to ordinary colds and flu, and patients are advised to take extra precautions when these symptoms appear.

The virus can be spread before symptoms appear, and some cases are very mild, so it is likely people have unwittingly carried the virus.

Last Friday two other visitors were declared to be free of novel coronavirus infection after initially being suspected of carrying the disease.
In that case, a father and son had come to Lapland from Wuhan via Norway and sought treatment at a health centre. However tests conducted by THL confirmed that they were not infected by the Wuhan strain of coronavirus, but some other viral respiratory infection.

Edit: Updated at 5.40pm to include comments from THL director Mika Salminen and information about the number of people possibly exposed to infection.

Updated at 6.30pm to include further details about the infected patient and other information from the THL press conference.

Updated at 6.53pm to include Markku Broas' comments about persons possibly exposed to infection.

Updated at 1.54pm on 30 January to correct reference to patient's estimated time of departure from Wuhan.

Sources Yle