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Naming the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the virus that causes it

Official names have been announced for the virus responsible for COVID-19 (previously known as “2019 novel coronavirus”) and the disease it causes. The official names are:

Disease

coronavirus disease
(COVID-19)

Virus

severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2
(SARS-CoV-2)

Why do the virus and the disease have different names?

Viruses, and the diseases they cause, often have different names. For example, HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. People often know the name of a disease, but not the name of the virus that causes it.

There are different processes, and purposes, for naming viruses and diseases.

Viruses are named based on their genetic structure to facilitate the development of diagnostic tests, vaccines and medicines. Virologists and the wider scientific community do this work, so viruses are named by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV).

Diseases are named to enable discussion on disease prevention, spread, transmissibility, severity and treatment. Human disease preparedness and response is WHO’s role, so diseases are officially named by WHO in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD).

ICTV announced “severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)” as the name of the new virus on 11 February 2020. This name was chosen because the virus is genetically related to the coronavirus responsible for the SARS outbreak of 2003. While related, the two viruses are different.

WHO announced “COVID-19” as the name of this new disease on 11 February 2020, following guidelines previously developed with the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

- [WHO Director-General's remarks at the media on 11 February 2020](#)

- [WHO Situation Report on 11 February 2020](#)

WHO and ICTV were in communication about the naming of both the virus and the disease.

What name does WHO use for the virus?

From a risk communications perspective, using the name SARS can have unintended consequences in terms of creating unnecessary fear for some populations, especially in Asia which was worst affected by the SARS outbreak in 2003.

For that reason and others, WHO has begun referring to the virus as “the virus responsible for COVID-19” or “the COVID-19 virus” when communicating with the public. Neither of these designations are intended as replacements for the official name of the virus as agreed by the ICTV.

Material published before the virus was officially named will not be updated unless necessary in order to avoid confusion.

More information:

- [How are new infectious diseases named?](#)
- [More about coronavirus disease \(COVID-2019\)](#)
- [WHO press briefings on the coronavirus disease \(COVID-2019\)](#)
- [International classification of diseases](#)
- [International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses](#)