

Loss of smell could reveal hidden virus cases: experts

AFP | Paris

From a mother unable to smell her baby's nappy to a lawmaker who suddenly could not taste food, some coronavirus patients have described a loss of olfactory senses -- and experts say this might be a new way to detect the virus.

Ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialists in Britain, the United States and France have noted a growing number of patients in recent weeks with anosmia -- the abrupt loss of smell -- and have said this could be a sign of COVID-19 in people who otherwise appear well.

In Britain, ENT doctors have urged health authorities to advise people with a sudden loss of smell or taste to self-isolate even if they have no other symptoms.

"Anything we can do to delay transmission is absolutely vital," Claire Hopkins, the president of the British Rhinological Society, said.

Hopkins, who published an open letter on the issue on Friday with ENT UK chief Nirmal Kumar, said she was not surprised when she heard initial reports from Iran and France of COVID-19 patients reporting a loss of smell.

Around 40 per cent of cases of sudden loss of smell in adults are caused by post-viral anosmia, she said, and previously known coronaviruses are thought to account for up to 15 per cent.

But she said the turning point came when an Italian colleague working in a hospital in the worst-hit north of the country mentioned he had observed a high incidence of loss of smell among frontline health workers.

This led to a flurry of posts on professional message boards.

"We all started to note an increase in patients who were



Anosmia is the abrupt loss of smell

The World Health Organisation lists the most common signs of COVID-19 as fever, tiredness and dry cough

young and otherwise completely asymptomatic presenting with new onset sense of smell loss," said Hopkins.

Nine out of the 20 patients of these patients had recently lost their ability to smell.

"That's extremely unusual," she said, adding that several of these patients had called Britain's health authorities concerned about COVID-19 but were told there was no need to self-isolate because it was not a recognised symptom.

'Significant symptoms'

Experts in several countries have flagged anosmia as a potential sign of COVID-19.

In France the head of the health service, Jerome Salomon, on Friday said ENT specialists had observed a "surge" in anosmia cases and said while it was still relatively rare, it had been seen in younger patients with "mild" symptoms.

The American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery on Sunday noted growing anecdotal evidence that anosmia and dysgeusia -- taste disorder -- were "significant symptoms" of the virus.

In Germany, virologist Hendrik Streeck from the University of Bonn, went house to house in Heinsberg, where around 1000 people were put under a two-week quarantine in February because of a local outbreak.

He said some two thirds of infected people reported losing their sense of smell and taste for a few days.

"It went so far that one

mother could no longer smell her child's full nappy. Others couldn't smell their shampoo anymore and their food started to taste bland," he told the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung newspaper.

Help for health workers

A lack of testing in many countries means that often only those with the most severe symptoms are confirmed to have the virus.

But several high-profile patients with milder cases have reported a loss of olfactory senses.

Nadine Dorries, the first British politician to test positive, said she lost both her sense of smell and taste.

"Eating and drinking warm or cold that's all I can tell," she posted on Twitter last week.

French basketball player Rudy Gobert, 27, whose positive coronavirus test prompted the NBA to shut down its season, tweeted he had not "been able to smell anything for the last 4 days" on Sunday.

Absent, a UK charity that provides support and advice on olfactory training to a relatively small community of people who have lost their sense of smell, has seen interest "skyrocket", according to founder Chrissi Kelly.

Many people reported that close contacts and family members had also experienced anosmia symptoms within recent weeks.

She said the advice on sense of smell loss could be particularly useful as a sign for medical workers to get a test or self-isolate, even without other symptoms.

"A healthcare worker who is infected unknowingly and spreading infection around colleagues is a disaster because we need to keep the workforce as healthy as possible," she said.

First patient recovers from new coronavirus, leaves makeshift Madrid facility



Medical staff at a makeshift medical facility in Madrid discharge their first patient to have recovered from the new coronavirus.

For Moscow's quarantined, 100,000 cameras are watching

Moscow

A vast and contentious network of facial recognition cameras keeping watch over Moscow is now playing a key role in the battle against the spread of the coronavirus in Russia. The city rolled out the technology just before the epi-

demic reached Russia, ignoring protests and legal complaints over sophisticated state surveillance.

Since last month, thousands of Muscovites have been confined to their homes for 14 days of compulsory quarantine after returning from virus-hit countries.

The Russian capital already had a tight network of 170,000 security cameras, set up in streets and metro stations throughout the city over the past decade. Around 100,000 have now been linked to artificial intelligence systems that can identify people being filmed.

Spanish soldiers find bodies in retirement homes

Madrid

Spanish soldiers deployed to help fight the new coronavirus outbreak have found elderly patients abandoned, and sometimes dead, at retirement homes, as an ice rink inside a Madrid shopping mall was turned into a temporary morgue to cope with a surge in cases.

The army has been charged with helping to disinfect retirement homes in Spain, one of the countries worst hit by the pandemic. Dozens of deaths from



The ice rink at the Palacio de Hielo, or Ice Palace, shopping centre in Madrid

in these residences," Defence Minister Margarita Robles said in an interview with private television channel Telecinco.

"The army, during certain visits, found some old people completely abandoned, sometimes even dead in their beds," she added.

An investigation has been launched, the general prosecutor announced.

The coronavirus death toll in Spain surged to 2,182 on Monday after 462 people died within 24 hours, according to health ministry figures.

Pakistan suspends civil servants for corona patient selfie

Karachi

Pakistan has suspended six civil servants after they posed for a selfie with a coronavirus patient in a quarantine centre, an official said Tuesday.

The selfie -- widely shared on social media -- pictured a group of men around the apparent patient, several of them smiling broadly and none wearing face masks.

The picture was taken at a quarantine facility near Sukkur in virus-hit Sindh province, where 399 of the country's 892



Pakistan troops patrol wearing facemasks

Sukkur, told AFP.

The commissioner added the six -- employees of the provincial land department -- were visiting a local politician who was in quarantine after contracting the novel coronavirus during a visit to Iran.

The suspension comes as Pakistan continued locking down large swathes of the country to battle the contagion.

Sindh police reported more than 700 people had been arrested in the bustling Karachi since Monday when the province announced its lockdown.

COVID-19 cases have been recorded so far.

"Six of the government employees have been suspended and put into quarantine," Rana Adeel, deputy commissioner in

Three-pronged distancing most effective at controlling COVID-19 - study

Reuters | London

A key modelling study from Singapore has found that putting multiple social lockdowns in place - including school closures - will have the biggest impact on curbing COVID-19, the pandemic disease caused by the new coronavirus.

Quarantining infected people and their family members, closing schools, and imposing workplace distancing and home-working can all limit the spread, the study found, but a combination of all three is most effective in reducing cases.

Singapore, which according to the latest World Health Organi-



High school English teacher, Fabiano da Silva Silveira, 41, from the Colegio Israelita Brasileiro or Brazilian Israeli High School leads an online class after regular classes were suspended due to coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, in Porto Alegre, Brazil

Singapore, which according to the latest World Health Organisation (WHO) data had reported 455 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and two deaths as of March 22, has imposed some social distancing recommendations but has not closed its schools.

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Elsewhere, millions of children have seen their schools closed in the United States, across much of Europe and in many other countries as governments have imposed strict social lockdown measures to stop people meeting and mingling in groups.

Published in the Lancet Infectious Diseases journal, the study, conducted by researchers from the National University of Singapore (NUS), looked at a simulated Singapore setting to analyse the potential impact of social distancing policies.

It found that while less effective than the combined three-pronged approach, quarantine plus workplace measures presented the next best option for reducing COVID-19 cases, followed by quarantine plus school closure, and then quarantine only.

"The results of this study provide policy makers in Singapore and other countries with evidence to begin the implementation of enhanced outbreak control measures that could mitigate or reduce local transmission rates if deployed effectively and in a timely manner," said Alex R Cook, an associate professor at NUS who co-led the work.