Coronavirus Update 27.1.20

We are receiving a few requests for information about how to manage the new virus that is making the news right now.  Although the chances are good that this will be a non-issue, there is a lot of public concern so we thought to bring you some information you could use to navigate the muddy waters.

The novel Coronavirus which originated in Wuhan, China is continuing to spread worldwide.  It is very early days at the moment so it is impossible to be sure how this virus will behave longer term, however it is likely that it will be somewhat similar to the SARS virus from 2003, which was of a similar type.  Evidence so far suggests that SARS-like behaviour is expected.  SARS was a very unpleasant disease for some people and caused significant disruption even though it did not spread especially widely. This is because as a rule, these viruses tend to be quite hard to catch, evolved as they are for animals other than humans.  Once the transition to humans is made, virus subtypes that are easier to catch often develop, though these tend to be less dangerous.  This may be because our immune systems are better at dealing with the sort of viruses that find it easy to infect us, although this is just one of several theories.

Right now (27/01/20) there are NO CASES in New Zealand so there is no immediate need for concern.  It is also Summer, which makes it less likely that viruses will be transmitted.  Most people who catch the virus don't die but rather they make a full recovery though some are very sick for a while.  Unfortunately, the virus can be spread by people before they become unwell so there is no effective way to screen at borders and therefore prevent transmission.

The main risk to New Zealand is that the virus could cause disruption to healthcare services as more very sick people would be expected to need treatment.  With good treatment, outcomes are excellent, but treating sick people disrupts other healthcare activity and so keeping the numbers of infected people low is very helpful.

**What should you do about it right now?**

There is certainly **no need to panic**, no need to avoid neighbours and no need to rush into anything now, but an ordely move to a higher state of preparedness is certainly called for.  In the very unlikely event of a pandemic, essential services such as power and water are expected to function normally, but access to shops may be difficult and it really helps to prevent disease spread if you stay away from other people.  You may also find yourself isolated from others without notice, or needing to stay away from home or school so be prepared to keep in touch, and be able to isolate yourself if required to do so.  The key is trying to prevent transmission, and having the ability to help yourselves so that emergency services are freed to deal with others who cannot.

* Take a trip to visit your neighbours - community bonds are really important at times like this.  Help elderly neighbours and relatives to prepare.
* This is a good time to review your emergency kit -are all your essentials in place?
* Could you live for 2 weeks on the food you have in storage?  If not, it is a good time to stock up on non-perishables like rice, pasta and tinned goods.  Just buy ones you will use anyway as the chances of needing them for an emergency are very, very small.
* If you take regular medication, make sure that you have AT LEAST a 2 week supply in stock at all times.  Don't wait until the last pack is empty before calling to make an appointment.  Do it sooner rather than later.
* Keep a stock of cold and flu remedies on hand - you will not die for the lack but some medicines can make illness less unpleasant - your pharmacist will give really good advice and can check the remedies are suitable for you, even if you are taking lots of other medicines.
* Make sure your home cleaning and hygiene supplies are stocked up.  You won't need 20 Litres of bleach, but having a full bottle on hand is a good idea.  Alcohol hand rub is not especially useful, but a bottle or two is worth having - this is only useful if water supplies are interrupted, which is most unlikely, and for hand hygiene when out of the home.  Keep some in your car.
* It might be a good idea to have a few masks in the house though this is not essential - ordinary dust or surgical masks will reduce your chances of spreading a cold if you are infected so can make it safer for family to care for you.  They are not thought to be especially effective at preventing you from catching viral infections, so don't depend on them.  Make sure you know how to use one properly, just in case.
* Make sure all your family contact details are up to date.  During a pandemic is not the time to find your child has changed their mobile phone number.  Check that everyone has a top-up for prepay plans.  Keep a spare charger for your mobile phone in your car.
* Talk to your employer about how they will be in touch if you cannot work - could you work from home?  What if you have to keep children off school for a few weeks - how would that work for you?  Again, not likely but well worth considering.
* When the flu season arrives, GET VACCINATED - the last thing we need is people with influenza thinking they have coronavirus - the symptoms are very similar so having a flu vaccine and especially getting children vaccinated really helps.

**REMEMBER - there is NO NEED TO PANIC - the chances of this virus spreading widely and causing significant harm are actually very small.**Remember that this is early days and the WHO does not yet consider this to be an emergency or of serious concern.