

EXPLAINER: HOW WHO NAMES A NEW DISEASE

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

A doctor takes a swab from a woman to test for the COVID-19 virus at a fever clinic in Yinan county in eastern China's Shandong province on February 12. | Photo Credit: [AP](#)

On February 11, the [World Health Organization officially announced COVID-19 as the name for the disease caused by the novel coronavirus](#). This comes more than 40 days after WHO was alerted by China about a cluster of pneumonia-like cases seen in the city of Wuhan in Hubei province.

Announcing the name at a press briefing in Geneva, the Director-General of WHO Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said: “[The name] gives us a standard format to use for any future coronavirus outbreaks.”

The WHO had to come up the name in line with the 2015 guidelines between the global agency, the World Organisation for Animal Health and the Food and Agriculture Organization.

The “CO” in COVID stands corona, while “VI” is for virus and “D” for disease. The number 19 stands for the year 2019 when the outbreak was first identified.

The urgency to assign a name to the disease is to prevent the use of other names that can be “inaccurate or stigmatising”. People outside the scientific community tend to call a new disease by common names. But once the name gets “established in common usage through the Internet and social media, they are difficult to change, even if an inappropriate name is being used. Therefore, it is important that whoever first reports on a newly identified human disease uses an appropriate name that is scientifically sound and socially acceptable,” says a May 2015 WHO [press release](#). In May 2015, the WHO came up guidelines on how to name a new disease.

The Coronavirus Study Group of the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses, which had assessed the novelty of the human pathogen, has [tentatively named](#) the virus as 2019-nCoV. The Coronavirus Study Group is responsible for developing the official classification of viruses and taxa naming of the Coronaviridae family.

Concerned about the stigma that names of new diseases can cause to certain people and religion, the WHO came up with the new guidelines in May 2015. The WHO identified the best practices to name new human diseases in consultation and collaboration with the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The main aim behind this exercise was to “minimise unnecessary negative impact of disease names on trade, travel, tourism or animal welfare, and avoid causing offence to any cultural, social, national, regional, professional or ethnic groups”.

According to the [guidelines](#), name of a new disease should consist of a combination of terms. These terms consist of a generic descriptive term based on clinical symptoms (respiratory), physiological processes (diarrhoea), and anatomical or pathological references (cardic). It can refer to specific descriptive terms such as those who are afflicted (infant, juvenile, and maternal), seasonality (summer, winter) and severity (mild, severe). The name can also include other factual elements such as the environment (ocean, river), causal pathogen (coronavirus) and the year the new disease is first detected with or without mentioning the month.

The year is used when it becomes “necessary to differentiate between similar events that

happened in different years". In the case of COVID-19, coronavirus has caused other diseases such as the Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS).

Besides, the WHO has also listed out the terms that should be avoided while naming a new disease. This includes, geographic locations, people's names, species of animal or food, references to culture, population, industry or occupation, and terms that incite undue fear.

There are a few disease names that mentions the geographic location — cities, countries or regions — where the disease was first identified. The Ebola virus disease derives its name from the location from where the virus was first identified — Yambuku in the Democratic Republic of the Congo which is about 100 km from the Ebola River. Likewise, Zika gets its name from the location from where the virus was first identified in rhesus monkeys — Uganda's Zika forest. The virus spread to humans in Uganda and Tanzania five years after it was discovered in 1947. Japanese encephalitis (first case documented in 1871 in Japan), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, Spanish Flu, Rift Valley fever, and Lyme disease are other examples where the disease name carries the location name.

A couple of diseases carry the name of the person who first identified the disease. Chagas disease is named after the Brazilian physician Carlos Chagas, who discovered the disease in 1909. Similarly, the Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease refers to the persons who described the disease (German neurologist Hans Gerhard Creutzfeldt and in 1920 and shortly afterward by Alfons Maria Jakob).

Some diseases carry the name of animals — bird flu (H5N1) and swine flu (H1N1). The 2009 H1N1 pandemic was commonly referred to as swine flu. It is important to note that the 2009 pandemic virus was not completely derived from swine. The virus contains a combination of flu genes from bird, swine, and human flu types. Calling the 2009 pandemic virus as swine flu caused a major impact on the pork industry.

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In one week, the number of people found infected by the novel coronavirus grew from 332 people in 13 Chinese provinces and four nations to 4,474 cases in 30 provinces and 18 countries

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