

## **Community Responses to SARS Outbreak and Prevention Activities**

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The current global outbreak of SARS poses an international public health threat. Hong Kong remains one of the most severely affected areas. The health psychology research team at the Department of Psychology has conducted a series of research to explore public understanding and psychological reactions to local SARS outbreak as well as to investigate psychosocial factors that influence the adoption of preventive health measures against this disease. In particular, the research team has conducted the following research:

(1) The research team has identified demographic and psychosocial factors relating to the practice of preventive health behaviors against SARS among adolescence, adults, and elderly people.

(2) The research team has evaluated the effectiveness of SARS community prevention activities and noted that there were significant increases in the rates of preventive health behaviors against SARS after the launching of these activities. We also found that effectiveness of these activities were related to whether the public perceived the government provided enough information and clear health guidelines about SARS, whether the public had confidence in the government's ability to manage the current outbreak and to control further spread of SARS, and whether the public believed preventive measures as recommended by local health authorities were effective.

Despite indications that local and global spread of SARS may have been contained, WHO has cautioned the possible resurgence of this disease in months ahead. It is thus important that research efforts should be continued to: (1) gauge community responses and vigilance in relation to possible outbreak of SARS in coming months; (2) explore how preventive health behaviors against SARS can be maintained; and (3) chart the direction of public prevention activities. Special attention should be paid to psychosocial factors that are found to relate to the public's practice of preventive health behaviors and the effectiveness of community prevention activities.

The research team believes that findings of SARS studies is applicable to pandemics of either known or new diseases. Results of these studies provide an understanding of major psychosocial factors that motivate people's adoption of health behaviors, which are in turn useful in the development of interventions to help people engage in these behaviors and change unhealthy practices. These results are also useful in assisting policy-makers in the planning and implementation of community prevention activities by targeting at salient motivation factors and at risks groups as well as factors that enhance the effectiveness of these activities.