VISION

Concerns about coronavirus

On 9 March, Hans Verhoef, an epidemiologist in the Human Nutrition and Health group at Wageningen, organized a debate in Impulse about COVID-19. 'I am concerned about hospitals' capacity.'

'I don't have all the data on the coronavirus but I am worried. The COVID-19 virus is spreading fast and we don't know how many Dutch people are infected but are not being picked up by the health service. That group can infect other people undetected. Secondly, I am concerned about hospitals' capacity. Dutch hospitals have 2000 intensive care beds, but is that enough in the event of an epidemic? Even now, they barely have enough coronavirus test kits and medical staff.'

This isn't like the flu?
'We don't know yet what the probability is of being infected by the coronavirus nor what the probability is of dying from it but all the evidence points to a virus that is more deadly than the flu virus we are familiar with. The population is vulnerable because it hasn't built up any immunity to this new virus and there is no vaccine as yet. There are also no medicines. What is more, patients remain infectious throughout the period of illness of two to three weeks, which is longer than for the usual flu virus. That lengthy period means the virus is transmitted more often and therefore spreads faster.'

But isn't the virus on its way out in China?
'That's true but that is thanks to the very rapid and stringent measures taken by the Chinese government from the start of the outbreak in December. China's achievement is amazing.'

What can we do?
'We need to be alert and make sure we don't help spread the virus. I am concerned for example about nursing homes with vulnerable old people and about people with chronic diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Are we doing enough to protect them? Above all, we need to wash our hands much more thoroughly and much more often than we do now.' Ⓡ **AS**

If you have questions about the coronavirus and WUR, read the article on page 7 or check out the intranet.