

Protective gear to fight virus 'rapidly depleting': WHO

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The World Health Organization said Tuesday that understanding how the new coronavirus spreads was rapidly increasing, but warned the protective gear needed to fight the disease was "rapidly depleting".

The UN health agency voiced concern that the masks, googles and other protective equipment used by health workers was running out amid panick buying and manipulation of markets.

"We are concerned that countries' abilities to respond are being compromised by the severe and increasing disruption to the global supply of personal protective equipment ... caused by rising demand, hoarding and misuse," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters in Geneva.

"We can't stop COVID-19 without protecting our health workers," he said. The prices of surgical masks have increased six-fold, while the cost for ventilators had tripled, he added.

Tedros said that WHO had shipped more than half a million sets of personal protective equipment to 27 countries, but warned that "supplies are rapidly depleting".

He urged a dramatic hike in production, saying WHO estimates the response to COVID-19 would require 89 million medical masks, 76 million pairs of examination gloves and 1.6 million goggles each month.

More than 3,100 people have died from the new virus, while over 92,000 have been infected across 77 countries and territories, according to AFP's latest toll based on official sources.

Deadlier than flu: Tedros

Tedros said he understood why people were rushing to stock up. "Fear is a natural human response to any threat, especially when it is a threat we don't completely understand."

But with more data, there was a growing understanding of the virus and

how it spreads, he said, stressing that the new virus was "unique".

While often compared to the flu, Tedros stressed that the virus was far more deadly.

"More people are susceptible to infection and some will suffer serious disease. Globally about 3.4 percent of COVID-19 cases have died," he said.

"By comparison, seasonal flu generally kills far fewer than 1 percent of those infected."

And while many people have over the years built up immunity to seasonal flu, "no one has immunity" to the new coronavirus, he acknowledged.

At the same time though, COVID-19 does not spread as easily as the flu, and unlike the flu "containment is possible".

Another difference, he said, is that while influenza can easily spread from people showing no symptoms, evidence from China shows "only one percent of reported cases do not have symptoms".

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