



Travel Guard[®] Health Advisory

Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS)

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Recent Developments

As of 9 June 2015 an outbreak of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) virus has been reported in South Korea. Authorities in South Korea and Hong Kong are working to contain the spread of the infection by implementing various degrees of health screenings, quarantines and, other safety measures.

The total number of known MERS infections in South Korea has risen to 95, with approximately seven known fatal cases with more than 2500 known people being quarantined at health facilities or at home, per the Korea Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (KCDC). According to the KCDC, at least 24 hospitals have treated patients exposed to the virus, though St. Mary's hospital in Pyeongtaek city, located approximately 40 mi (65 km) south of the capital Seoul, has seen the largest number of infections. Health officials have asked that anyone that visited the hospital in Pyeongtaek between 15 and 29 May report to a medical facility for screening, as they may have been exposed to the infection.

U.S. government officials reported on 5 June that a South Korean airman stationed at Osan Air Base in South Korea tested positive for MERS. The airman has been quarantined off base and approximately 100 known individuals that were in contact with the patient are currently in quarantine. Public health officials have stated that a physician at a Seoul hospital has tested positive for MERS; he is believed to have interacted with more than 1,500 individuals while infected. Authorities have implemented screening measures at airports in an attempt to mitigate the spread of the virus. More than 1,800 schools have been closed temporarily across South Korea and the government has staffed a hotline to answer questions related to the virus.



PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Travelers with flu-like symptoms should stay home until at least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever. We also recommend:

- ✓ Avoid contact with people who are sick or may have been exposed to the flu.
- ✓ Limit contact with others while sick.
- ✓ Avoid large crowds if there is an outbreak.
- ✓ Wash your hands before, during and after you prepare food and before you eat.
- ✓ Refrain from touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- ✓ Avoid stress and get plenty of rest.
- ✓ Drink plenty of fresh water and eat as healthy as possible.
- ✓ Take immune - boosting supplements and vitamins, if approved by your health care provider.
- ✓ Prepare for trips by consulting the local health map to avoid areas of outbreak.
- ✓ Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and throw away used tissues immediately.
- ✓ Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces, such as toys and doorknobs.

As a general precaution, anyone visiting farms, markets, barns or other places where animals are present should practice general hygiene measures, including regular hand washing before and after touching animals, and avoiding contact with sick animals.

On 9 June, government authorities in Hong Kong issued a red alert for its citizens in South Korea, which is the second-highest outbound travel advisory on a three-point scale and defined as a significant threat. The red alert warns resident against non-essential travel to South Korea due to the threat posed by the outbreak of the MERS virus there. There have been no known confirmed cases in Hong Kong; however, more than 10,000 travelers and multiple travel agencies in Hong Kong have been impacted by the recent outbreak due to the cancellation of tours to South Korea by the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong until 30 June. Additional health measures and screenings will be imposed in public transportation facilities in Hong Kong to prevent the spread of the MERS virus.

Background

MERS was first reported in Saudi Arabia in 2012, but new cases have been reported recently, and the number has been increasing.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) there have been 1,139 known laboratory-confirmed cases of infection with MERS-CoV, including at least 431 related known deaths since 2012.

While the aforementioned Asian countries are currently impacted by MERS, most cases since 2012 have been concentrated throughout the Middle East. The countries that have reported known cases of MERS are Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen (Middle East); France, Germany, Greece, Italy, and the United Kingdom (Europe); Tunisia and Egypt (Africa); Malaysia, China, South Korea, and the Philippines (Asia); and the United States of America (Americas).

What is Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS)?

MERS is a viral respiratory illness. MERS is caused by a coronavirus called Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV). Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that can cause diseases ranging from the common cold to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

The exact source of the virus is not known, but according to the U.S. organization the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), it is likely from an animal source. MERS-CoV has been found in camels in Qatar, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as well as bats in Saudi Arabia. Camels in a few other countries have also tested positive for antibodies to MERS-CoV, indicating they were previously infected with MERS-CoV or a closely related virus. It is not yet understood exactly how people become infected with MERS-CoV. The virus has been shown to spread between people who are in close contact, such as providing unprotected care to a patient. Recently, transmission from infected patients to healthcare personnel has also been observed. Thus far, no sustained community transmission has been documented.



Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS)

-  Countries with confirmed known MERS cases
-  Known confirmed MERS locations

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Signs and Symptoms

The main signs and symptoms of infection are fever, cough and shortness of breath. Pneumonia is a common finding on examination. There are also reports of gastrointestinal symptoms, including diarrhea. Severe illness can cause respiratory failure that requires mechanical ventilation and support in an intensive-care unit. Some patients have had organ failure, especially of the kidneys, or septic shock. Approximately 30 to 40 percent of patients with MERS have died. The virus appears to cause more severe acute respiratory illness in patients with weakened immune systems and those with chronic diseases such as diabetes, cancer and chronic lung disease.

Therefore, it is important to seek early medical attention so that a proper diagnosis and appropriate medical care may be provided.

Medical Management and Treatment of MERS

It is recommended that travelers who notice symptoms of MERS contact a local medical provider as soon as possible. Currently, no vaccine is available to prevent or treat MERS. There are no specific treatments recommended for illnesses caused by MERS-CoV, and medical care is mainly supportive and for symptom relief.

References

- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC](#)
- [World Health Organization Global Alert and Response](#)

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