



*Embassy of the United States of America
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia*

MESSAGE FOR U.S. CITIZENS

Middle East Respiratory Syndrome-Coronavirus

April 30, 2014

As most of you are aware, a new virus was discovered in Saudi Arabia two years ago; it is now named the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome-Coronavirus, or MERS-CoV. Since April of 2012, there have been cases of MERS-CoV in Saudi Arabia, as well as some cases in other countries. In the last month, Saudi Arabia has seen a number of new cases across the country, most of them in Jeddah. Despite this increase, the total number of people infected with MERS-CoV remains relatively low over a two-year period. The U.S. Embassy in Riyadh is in close contact with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and monitoring the situation continuously. Additionally, the World Health Organization (WHO) has a team currently in Saudi Arabia working with the Ministry of Health on MERS-CoV.

Information from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) re MERS-CoV:

While we do not know where the virus came from or exactly how it spreads, it is likely that MERS-CoV originally came from an animal source. Studies have been done to test animals, including camels, for evidence of MERS-CoV infection; however, more information is needed to identify the role that camels, bats, and other animals may play in possible transmission of MERS-CoV. We do not know the reservoir animal for the virus (the primary host of the virus), the possible intermediate animal host, or the ways that the virus is transmitted from animals to humans. There is currently no evidence that MERS-CoV is found in or infects small animal pets such as cats or dogs. The WHO recommends ([see more here from WHO](#)) that if you are immune-compromised, or have a pre-existing medical condition that could affect your immune system, that you be careful when visiting farms, barns, marketplaces, or other settings where you may encounter livestock/non-household animals, and avoid exposure to those animals. MERS-CoV has been shown to spread between people who are in very close contact; it does not, however, seem to spread as easily as SARS or many strains of the flu.

In general, Americans visiting Saudi Arabia who are not working in a health care setting or with livestock/non-household animals are considered to be at very low risk for exposure to MERS-CoV.

Symptoms:

- MERS-CoV symptoms include fever, cough, and shortness of breath.
- Many people who have contracted the virus have also experienced gastrointestinal symptoms, including diarrhea.
- Some have suffered from kidney failure.
- Many otherwise healthy, young or middle aged individuals who tested positive for the virus have not experienced any symptoms, or suffered from only mild respiratory illness, recovering without incident.

Risks:

- Based on the information we have so far, people with pre-existing health conditions (comorbidities) or weakened immune systems may be more vulnerable to MERS-CoV or may develop a more severe case of the infection. About 75 percent of the people who have died of MERS-CoV (just over 100 people in two years) have had a pre-existing condition.
- Comorbidities from reported cases for which we have information have included diabetes, cancer, and chronic lung, heart, and kidney disease.

Ways to help you stay healthy:

- CDC advises that people follow these tips to help prevent many respiratory illnesses:
 - Wash your hands often with soap and water for 20 seconds, and help young children do the same. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
 - Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, and then throw the tissue in the trash.
 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
 - Avoid personal contact, such as kissing, or sharing cups or eating utensils, with sick people.
 - Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces such as toys and doorknobs.

Special guidance regarding travelers for Hajj and Umrah:

In 2013, the Saudi Ministry of Health recommended that, in order to protect health and safety, people who meet the following descriptions not come to Saudi Arabia this year for the Hajj or Umrah and should postpone such travel to a later time:

- The elderly (defined as those older than 65 years of age).
- Those with chronic diseases (e.g. heart disease, kidney disease, respiratory disease, diabetes).
- Those with immune deficiency (congenital and acquired).
- Those with malignant or terminal illnesses.
- Pregnant women and children under the age of 12.

For more information, see the CDC websites: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/mers and <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/watch/coronavirus-arabian-peninsula-uk>.

Also see the WHO coronavirus website:

www.who.int/csr/disease/coronavirus_infections/en/index.html.

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