

Update on latest MERS situation in Saudi Arabia

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) is today (May 10) closely monitoring four additional cases of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) by Saudi Arabia. The CHP again urged the public to pay special attention to safety and take due consideration of the health risks when visiting other places.

According to the WHO, three of the abovementioned cases were found to be epidemiologically linked to exposures in the same healthcare facility, involving three males aged between 56 and 60 years with underlying health conditions. After identifying the index case, two additional cases were revealed through contact tracing, which are suspected to be secondary healthcare associated cases due to contact with the index case. The investigations are ongoing to understand and verify the transmission route. The remaining case involved a 32-year-old male who had direct contact with camels.

The WHO emphasised that the notification of these cases does not alter their overall risk assessment, and they anticipated the reporting of additional MERS-CoV infection cases from the Middle East or other countries where the virus is circulating in dromedaries. According to the latest information, 2 613 MERS cases have been reported to the WHO (with 941 deaths) since 2012.

"We will maintain close communication with the WHO and relevant health authorities," a spokesman for the CHP said.

"As countries in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, continue to report MERS cases from time to time, travellers should refrain from going to farms, barns or markets with camels and avoid contact with sick persons and animals, especially camels, birds or poultry. Most of the cases reported in the Middle East had a history of exposure to camels, consumption of camel milk or contact with other MERS patients," the spokesman said.

From time to time, suspected MERS cases reported to the CHP for investigation involve patients with a history of contact with camels in the Middle East. The CHP strongly advises travel agents organising tours to the Middle East to abstain from arranging camel rides and activities involving direct contact with camels, which are known risk factors for acquiring MERS-CoV. Travellers to affected areas should maintain vigilance, adopt appropriate health precautions and take heed of personal, food and environmental hygiene.

"As the Hajj pilgrimage will begin soon, pilgrims visiting Mecca in Saudi Arabia should be vigilant against MERS. Those with pre-existing medical conditions, such as diabetes, chronic lung disease, chronic renal disease and

immunodeficiency, are more likely to develop severe infections if they are exposed to MERS-CoV. Pilgrims should hence consult healthcare providers before travel to review the risk and assess whether a pilgrimage is advisable. Pilgrims visiting Mecca may refer to the DH's [advice](#). If pilgrims feel unwell during the two weeks after returning to Hong Kong, they should wear a surgical mask and seek medical attention immediately and inform a doctor of their recent travel history," the spokesman added.

â€‹The public may visit the MERS page of the [CHP](#) and its [Travel Health Service](#) to learn more about MERS statistics in [affected areas](#). The public should also refer to the CHP's [Facebook page](#) and [YouTube channel](#) and the WHO's [latest news](#) for more information and health advice. Tour leaders and tour guides operating overseas tours are advised to refer to the CHP's [health advice on MERS](#). Persons who plan to make the pilgrimage should also stay tuned to the latest health recommendations by the health authority of Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage.