

Update on latest MERS situation in Saudi Arabia

In response to the World Health Organization (WHO)'s report on nine new cases of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in Saudi Arabia, the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) today (May 13) appealed to the public to be vigilant and to take appropriate protective measures when visiting affected regions.

According to the WHO, the nine new cases involved five males and four females aged above 18. Two of them have passed away. Epidemiological data showed that one of the cases had indirect contact with camel.

Seven of the nine abovementioned cases were found to be epidemiologically linked. After one patient was hospitalised and confirmed to have MERS, six health and care workers who had cared for the patients were also confirmed through contact tracing, with four of them being asymptomatic and two showing mild symptoms. They were suspected to be infected in the healthcare facility and had recovered.

The WHO maintains its overall risk assessment of MERS in Saudi Arabia and expects that more cases of MERS will be reported in the Middle East or other countries where the virus is circulating in dromedaries. According to the latest information, 2 627 cases of MERS (including 946 deaths) have been notified by the WHO since 2012, and Saudi Arabia has notified 2 218 cases (including the above patients). The CHP will maintain close communication with the WHO and relevant health authorities to monitor the activity and trends of MERS.

"Scientific evidence shows that dromedary camels are reservoirs for MERS-CoV. Dromedary camels infected with MERS-CoV may not show any signs of infection. Infected animals may shed MERS-CoV through their nasal and eye discharge and faeces, and potentially in their milk and urine. The virus can also be found in the raw offal and meat of infected animals. Among the reported cases in the Middle East, most of the patients had been in contact with dromedary camels, consumed camel milk, or had contact with patients who had been diagnosed with MERS. The CHP recommends travel agents organising tours to the Middle East to refrain from arranging for visitors to ride dromedary camels or to participate in any activities involving direct contact with dromedary camels, which are known risk factors for acquiring MERS-CoV. Moreover, travellers to the region should avoid visiting farms, barns or markets where there are dromedary camels, as well as contact with patients and animals, especially dromedary camels," the Controller of the CHP, Dr Edwin Tsui, said.

"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," he added.

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](#).