

Clinician Alert: Public health considerations for the Hajj



SAFETY NOTICE 012/25

Issue date:	26 May 2025
Content reviewed by:	Health Protection
Distributed to:	Chief Executives; Directors of Clinical Governance; Director, Regulation and Compliance Unit
KEY MESSAGE:	<p>Clinicians should be alert for infectious diseases including MERS, meningococcal disease, measles and other respiratory infections in travellers returning from the Hajj (June/July).</p> <p>If MERS is suspected, ensure local infection prevention and control and notify the NSW Specialist Service for High Consequence Infectious Diseases</p>
ACTION REQUIRED BY:	Clinicians
REQUIRED ACTION:	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Distribute this Safety Notice to all relevant clinicians and clinical departments where patients may present with respiratory symptoms.2. Ensure that clinicians and other relevant staff are aware of the recommendations in this Safety Notice and take appropriate action.3. Confirm receipt and distribution of this Safety Notice within 72 hours to: moh-communicablediseases@health.nsw.gov.au
DEADLINE:	29 May 2025
We recommend you also inform:	<p>Directors, Managers and Staff of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emergency Departments• Virtual Care Services• Respiratory Medicine• Infectious Diseases / Infection Prevention and Control
Website:	<p>https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/sabs/Pages/default.aspx</p> <p>http://internal.health.nsw.gov.au/quality/sabs/index.html</p>
Review date:	December 2025

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Situation

Many people travel to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj pilgrimage (4th – 9th June 2025). The Hajj is one of the world's largest annual religious events, in which up to 4 million pilgrims from 182 countries travel to Saudi Arabia. Travellers will be returning to NSW over the following weeks. Clinicians should be alert for Middle Eastern respiratory syndrome (MERS) and other travel-related illnesses (including invasive meningococcal disease, measles, influenza, RSV and COVID-19) in unwell individuals returning from the Middle East.

Background

MERS coronavirus (MERS-CoV), distinct from SARS-CoV and SARS-CoV-2, is a zoonotic virus transmitted to humans via infected dromedary camels in the Middle East through direct or indirect contact. Secondary transmission between humans is mostly associated with healthcare settings but has also occurred among family and workplace close contacts.

Between 1 March and 21 April 2025, the Ministry of Health (MoH) of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) reported nine cases of MERS-CoV infection. Two of these cases died. Among the nine cases, a cluster of seven cases were identified in Riyadh, including six healthcare workers who acquired the infection from caring for a single infected patient. Since 2012, a total of 2627 cases and 946 associated deaths have been reported to WHO from 27 countries. Since 2019, there have been no human MERS-CoV infections reported from countries outside the Middle East.

In 2024 and 2025 there have been reports of meningococcal disease among travellers for Hajj and Umrah (another pilgrimage that can occur at any time). In March 2025, 11 cases of invasive meningococcal disease (IMD) were reported in Saudi Arabia, all linked to Umrah pilgrims between January and March. Six IMD cases were also reported among returning travellers. Other infectious diseases of risk to pilgrims include measles, respiratory syncytial virus, influenza and COVID-19. In 2024, KSA reported 1,260 cases of measles to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Further information on the health requirements for the Hajj and Umrah are available at [Pilgrim's Health](#).

Assessment

MERS remains a risk in the Middle East. May-June is a peak travel period from the Middle East, significantly increasing the risk of MERS and other travel-related illnesses (e.g., measles, meningococcal diseases) in travellers from the region. Awareness of this increased risk is essential for the timely identification and management of potential cases.

Recommendations

Health care facilities should implement infection prevention and control measures to prevent the possible spread of MERS-CoV. Ensure timely identification and management of cases, isolation of suspected cases, transmission-based precautions, and education and training for clinicians.

Consider MERS if a patient has symptoms of acute respiratory illness and has either:

- Recently travelled from or resided in the Middle East
- Been in contact with a symptomatic person from the Middle East
- Been in a health care facility with recent MERS cases
- Had contact with camels or raw camel products in the Middle East

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- Been in contact with a probable or confirmed MERS case within 14 days before symptom onset

If you suspect MERS, apply initial infection prevention and control measures: airborne, contact & droplet precautions and negative pressure isolation room, obtain a full travel and exposure history, and contact the Specialist Service for High Consequence Infectious Diseases on 1800 HCID 00 or 1800 424 300. For other suspected respiratory infections, ensure local infection prevention and control measures: airborne, contact & droplet precautions.

Further information

- Australia Government Department of Health and Aged Care – MERS resources for travellers and the public
<https://www.health.gov.au/diseases/middle-east-respiratory-syndrome-mers>
- World Health Organization – MERS fact sheet
https://www.who.int/health-topics/middle-east-respiratory-syndrome-coronavirus-mers#tab=tab_1
- World Health Organization Disease Outbreak News– MERS – Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/disease-outbreak-news/item/2025-DON569>
- World Health Organization Disease Outbreak News– Invasive meningococcal disease – Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/disease-outbreak-news/item/2025-DON563>
- NSW Biocontainment Centre - Home (sharepoint.com) -
<https://nswhealth.sharepoint.com/sites/BIOCON-WSLHD>
- NSW Policy Directive Early Response to High Consequence Infectious Diseases -
https://www1.health.nsw.gov.au/pds/Pages/doc.aspx?dn=PD2024_005
- CEC High Consequence Infectious Diseases – Infection Prevention and Control Principles -
<https://www.cec.health.nsw.gov.au/keep-patients-safe/infection-prevention-and-control/high-consequence-infectious-diseases>
- Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Health – Pilgrim’s Health
https://www.moh.gov.sa/en/HealthAwareness/Pilgrims_Health/Pages/default.aspx