

Human pathogen information sheet – hygiene keeps you safe!

What is MERS?

MERS stands for *Middle East Respiratory Syndrome* and is the name given to an infection of the respiratory system caused by the *MERS Coronavirus (MERS-CoV)*, which was first identified in 2012. The course of infection can vary widely: some people may notice nothing or have only slight symptoms while others can develop a very severe – and sometimes fatal – respiratory disorder. To date, cases of MERS-CoV infection have been reported primarily from the Arabian Peninsula and for the most part in Saudi Arabia. In all cases of the disease reported outside the Arabian Peninsula to date, the patient had previously spent time in this region or had had close contact with other MERS patients.

How is the MERS coronavirus transmitted?

From animals to humans

Dromedary camels are the pathogen's most likely natural reservoir. Transmission to humans is possible from close contact with these animals. Not enough is yet known about the types of contact favourable to transmission or whether animal products also have any role to play.

Person-to-person

The pathogen can also be transmitted from one person to another. No lasting transmission of the disease to the general population has yet been observed, however. The risk of contracting the disease is particularly high for people in close contact with the patient, especially in cases where protective measures are not adequate when providing care to affected individuals.

What symptoms do the patients show?

The disease usually starts with flu-like symptoms such as fever, coughing and shortness of breath. Gastrointestinal symptoms – and diarrhoea in particular – can also occur. Pneumonia-like symptoms frequently develop. In later stages, complications can include acute respiratory distress syndrome and renal failure. The disease is often fatal.

What's the incubation period – and how long are you infectious?

The length of time between infection and the first signs of illness is usually one to two weeks. Once symptoms appear, patients can then pass the disease on to others. It is not yet known how long patients stay infectious. Infected people who do not develop any signs of disease may be able to infect other people, but there is as yet no evidence one way or the other.

Who is most at risk?

- ▶ Those at greatest risk of infection are visitors to the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, especially after contact with dromedary camels.
- ▶ There is also an increased risk of infection for people in close contact with MERS patients, and healthcare workers in particular.
- ▶ Older individuals and people with a weakened immune system (e.g. following an organ transplant or in the case of cancer) or systemic diseases such as diabetes and chronic lung or kidney disorders are particularly at risk of developing severe forms of the disease.

What should I do if I fall ill?

- ▶ If you suddenly fall ill with a respiratory system infection accompanied by symptoms of fever and coughing during a stay on the Arabian Peninsula or in another high-risk area, and this illness is severe enough to compromise your daily activities, then you should seek medical advice as soon as possible.
- ▶ If the symptoms occur up to two weeks after your stay abroad, you should inform your doctor - if possible by telephone, before visiting the surgery. This also applies in cases where you have had close contact with people returning from travel to these countries who are suffering from relevant symptoms or developing signs of the actual disease.
- ▶ Stay away from other people.

Human pathogen information sheet – hygiene keeps you safe!

What should I do if I fall ill?

- ▶ Sneeze or cough into a disposable handkerchief and then throw it away immediately into a closed waste container. If no handkerchief is available, cough or sneeze into the crook of the arm, not into a hand held in front of you.
- ▶ Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water.
- ▶ If you are suffering from diarrhoea, observe a stricter regime for hand and toilet hygiene.

How can I protect myself?

- ▶ If you are planning a trip to the Arabian Peninsula or to other countries where MERS-CoV infections have occurred, then you are strongly advised to discuss this with your GP, especially if you suffer from a systemic disease such as diabetes.
- ▶ During your visit, wash your hands regularly and thoroughly with soap and water. This also offers protection against many other pathogens.
- ▶ During your stay on the Arabian Peninsula, avoid direct contact with animals, and with dromedary camels in particular.
- ▶ If you visit an animal farm or a livestock market, take standard precautions for hand hygiene if you have touched any animals – especially dromedary camels.
- ▶ Do not consume any raw meat, raw or inadequately pasteurised milk, or urine (e.g. if consumed for medicinal purposes) – especially from camels. Avoid all raw foodstuffs, and especially those that could possibly have come into contact with raw animal products, excreta or secretions. As a rule, you should wash, peel or boil raw fruit and vegetables thoroughly before consumption.
- ▶ Any individuals with a weakened immune system, diabetes or chronic lung/kidney disorders should take especial care to avoid all contact with dromedary camels and raw animal products.
- ▶ When visiting high-risk areas, avoid any unnecessary contact with people suffering from respiratory infections or diarrhoea. If close contact is unavoidable – because you are caring for a sick individual, for example – then observe standard precautions for hand hygiene. Do not touch your eyes, mouth or nose with unwashed hands. You can also wear a protective mask over your mouth and nose.
- ▶ If you are already suffering from a different acute respiratory infection and fever, postpone all travel to countries of the Arabian Peninsula or other high-risk areas.
- ▶ *A vaccination against the MERS coronavirus is not available at the moment.*

Where can I find out more?

Your local health authority can provide you with further advice and information. For up-to-date information on the spread of the disease, please visit the WHO website at (www.who.int/en).

Further information (for medical professionals) and recent risk assessments can be found on the Robert Koch Institute website (www.rki.de/mers).

Please also follow the advice for travellers given by the Federal Foreign Office (www.auswaertiges-amt.de). For more information about using hygiene to guard against infection, please visit the Federal Centre for Health Education website (www.infektionsschutz.de).



STEMPEL

Issued by:
Federal Centre for Health Education, Cologne.
All rights reserved.

Created in collaboration with the Federal Association Of Public Health Service Medical Practitioners (BVÖGD) and in consultation with the Robert Koch Institute.

This public health advisory notice is offered as a free download on the www.infektionsschutz.de website.