

What is Coronavirus?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that cause illness in humans and animals. In people, coronaviruses can cause illnesses ranging in severity from the common cold to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

What is MERS-CoV infection?

This novel coronavirus, first detected in April 2012, is a new virus that has not been seen in humans before. It is now known as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV).

Where are MERS-CoV infections occurring?

Nine countries have now reported cases of human infection with MERS-CoV. Cases have been reported in France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom. All cases have had some connection (whether direct or indirect) with the Middle East. In France, Italy, Tunisia and the United Kingdom, limited local transmission has occurred in people who had not been to the Middle East but who had been in close contact with laboratory-confirmed or probable cases.

What are the symptoms of MERS-CoV?

Common symptoms are acute, serious respiratory illness with fever, cough, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties. Most patients have had pneumonia. Many have also had gastrointestinal symptoms, including diarrhoea. Some patients have had kidney failure. About half of people infected with MERS-CoV have died. In people with immune deficiencies, the disease may have an atypical presentation. It is important to note that the current understanding of illness caused by this infection is based on a limited number of cases and may change as we learn more about the virus.

How do people become infected with this virus?

We do not yet know how people become infected with this virus. Investigations are underway to determine the source of the virus, the types of exposure that lead to infection, the mode of transmission, and the clinical pattern and course of disease.

Can the virus be transmitted from person to person?

Yes. We have now seen multiple clusters of cases in which human-to-human transmission has occurred. These clusters have been observed in health-care facilities, among family members and between co-workers. However, the mechanism by which transmission occurred in all of these cases, whether respiratory (e.g. coughing, sneezing) or direct physical contact with the patient or contamination of the environment by the patient, is unknown. Thus far, no sustained community transmission has been observed.

Is there a vaccine or treatment for MERS-CoV?

No. No vaccine is currently available. Treatment is largely supportive and should be based on the patient's clinical condition.

How can people protect themselves from getting MERS-CoV?

It is not possible to give specific advice on prevention, as neither the source of the virus nor the mode of transmission is yet certain. It is always prudent to avoid close contact, when possible, with anyone who shows symptoms of respiratory illness and to maintain good hand hygiene. Other effective general measures include avoiding eating uncooked or undercooked meats, unwashed or unpeeled fruits or vegetables, and consuming drinks made without clean water. If you become sick while travelling, you should avoid close contact with other people while you have symptoms and use good respiratory hygiene. If you have respiratory symptoms, such as coughing or sneezing, you should cough or sneeze into a sleeve or flexed elbow, or tissue, and throw used tissues into a closed bin immediately after use.

The chances of contracting the virus are small. However, people who meet the following criteria should see a health-care worker as soon as possible: people who have travelled to the Middle East who develop breathing difficulties that are not explained by any other illness or virus; ill people who are immunocompromised and have recently travelled to the Middle East.

How many people have been infected by MERS-CoV?

From September 2012 to date, WHO has been informed of a global total of 94 confirmed cases of human infection with MERS-CoV, including 46 deaths. Reporting countries are France, Germany, Italy Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates. Majority of cases have had some association (whether direct or indirect) with the Middle East.

Are health workers at risk from MERS-CoV?

Yes. Transmission has occurred in health-care facilities, including spread from patients to health-care providers. WHO recommends that health-care workers consistently apply appropriate infection prevention and control measures.

How is Sri Lanka responding to the emergence of MERS-CoV?

All hospitals have been alerted for possible suspected cases to be notified along recommended surveillance case definitions. A case management and infection control guideline had been compiled and distributed.

An information leaflet had been developed in all 3 languages and distributed among Haj-Umra pilgrims and Middle East workers through mosques and travel agencies.

However according to WHO guidance any travel or trade restrictions with respect to MERS-CoV have not been imposed.