



ALERT FOR CLINICIANS

Infectious disease risk and the Hajj pilgrimage

KEY POINTS

- The Hajj pilgrimage is taking place in Saudi Arabia from 14 to 19 June 2024.
- There is a small risk of Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) and invasive meningococcal disease (IMD) in returning Hajj pilgrims.
- Take an exposure and travel history.
- For patients with an ILI reporting travel to Saudi Arabia within the past 14 days: isolate the person immediately and use appropriate infection prevention and control precautions.
- Notify suspected cases **urgently** to your local [Public Health Unit](#) (or the on-call Public Health Physician on 9328 0553 if after hours).
- See Australian Centre for Disease Control factsheets for [health professionals](#) and [general practice](#).

Background

- MERS-CoV is a zoonotic coronavirus which can be transmitted to humans via exposure to infected camels and camel products in the Middle East. Person-to-person transmission can occur, particularly in health care settings.
- Clinical presentation ranges from asymptomatic infection to acute upper respiratory illness, pneumonia or pneumonitis. It can be severe with mortality of around 35%.
- Those at higher risk of severe disease include the elderly, those who are immunocompromised or have comorbidities.
- MERS-CoV2 cases are at lowest levels since 2014 in the Arabian Peninsula with one fatality in Saudi Arabia in 2024. No cases of MERS-CoV have ever been reported in Australia, however other countries have experienced large nosocomial outbreaks from one imported case.
- A cluster of IMD cases (serogroup W) have been reported internationally related to travellers returning from the Umrah pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia. All Hajj pilgrims are required to be vaccinated against meningococcal ACWY.
- Although the risk is small, clinicians should be alert to the risk of MERS-CoV and IMD in returning pilgrims and ensure a travel history is taken from all patients with an infectious illness.

For people returning from Saudi Arabia who present with an ILI

- Immediately **isolate** the person in a single room with ensuite facilities, preferably in a negative pressure isolation room.
- Implement standard, contact, droplet and **airborne transmission-based precautions**. This includes the use of a **gown, gloves, protective eyewear** and **particulate filter respirator**.
- **Ask about exposure** to camels, camel products (e.g. milk, urine or meat), hospitals, or people with acute respiratory illness.
- **Notify suspect cases URGENTLY** to your local [Public Health Unit](#) or the on-call Public Health Physician on 9328 0553 if after hours. Clinical advice may be sought from an Infectious Disease Physician/Clinical Microbiologist.
- Further information about MERS-CoV, including factsheets for health professionals and an [information card](#) for travellers, is available at www.health.gov.au/MERS.

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